WEST

MAY

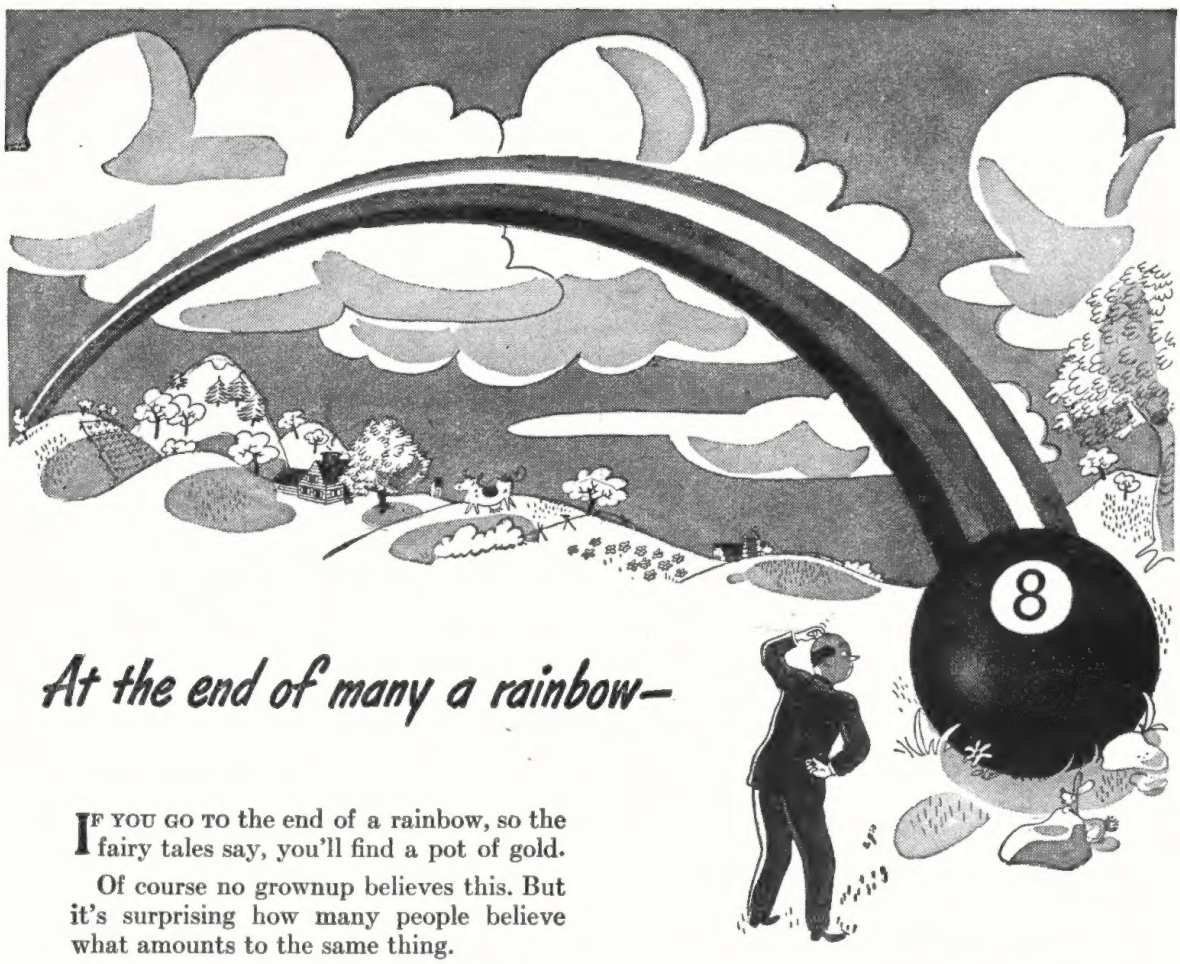
15¢

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

The WHIP

An Exciting Complete Book-Length Novel

By LESLIE SCOTT



At the end of many a rainbow—

IF YOU GO TO the end of a rainbow, so the fairy tales say, you'll find a pot of gold.

Of course no grownup believes this. But it's surprising how many people believe what amounts to the same thing.

That is, many of us have a dreamy notion that somewhere, sometime, we'll come upon a good deal of money. We go along from day to day, spending nearly all we make, and believing that *somehow* our financial future will take care of itself.

Unfortunately, this sort of rainbow-chasing is much more apt to make you wind up behind the eight ball than with a pot of gold.

When you come right down to it, the only sure-fire way the average man can plan financial security for himself and his family is through saving—*and saving regularly.*

One of the soundest, most convenient ways to save is by buying U. S. Savings Bonds through the Payroll Plan.

These bonds are the safest in the world. They mount up fast. And in just 10 years, they pay you $4 for every $3 you put in.

So isn't it just plain common sense to buy every U. S. Savings Bond you can possibly afford?

P. S. You can buy U. S. Savings Bonds at any bank or post office, too.

SAVE THE EASY WAY... BUY YOUR BONDS THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS

Contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America as a public service.

Thousands Now Play Popular Songs

who didn't know a note of music before!

Plays Hit Songs

I am on the seventh lesson and can already play several hit songs. The cost seems so little for what I have already accomplished, I don't know how to thank you for making such a course possible.

*B. E. S.,
Lunenburg, Ariz.

Easy To Understand

I find the lessons easy to understand. One of the most helpful things is the clearness with which everything is explained. I recommend your course highly to everyone.

*M. L. M.,
Tucson, Ariz.

You, too, can play any instrument at home, without a teacher, by this easy as A-B-C method . . .

YES, thousands of folks who didn't know a thing about music before, are now having the time of their lives playing today's popular tunes. Thanks to this famous U. S. School, easy as A-B-C home-study method, they learned to play in spare time, without a private teacher.

Just as countless others have learned music this simple, short-cut "Print and Picture" way . . . you, too, can make your musical dreams come true . . . and have loads of fun while learning.

Learn to Play by Playing!

Instead of practicing monotonous scales and exercises, we start you off playing real little tunes with the very first lesson. You begin with simple melodies. When you master these you go on to more advanced tunes. And in a remarkably short time you should be thrilled to find that you can play many popular pieces by note.

Here's more good news! No matter which instrument you want to learn, it costs only a few cents a day. And the low cost includes everything . . . printed instructions, large pictures and diagrams, valuable sheet music and our special Personal Advisory Service.

More Friends . . . New Popularity

Music is the key to good times. Once you learn to play you are invited everywhere. So if you want new friends, greater popularity and more fun than you've ever had before . . . send for booklet giving complete details. Fill out and mail the coupon now! U. S. School of Music 2945 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y. (49th Successful Year)

*Pictures by professional models. Actual names on request.

See how simple it is!

'My country 'tis of Thee, Sweet land of liberty'

Look at the music. The first note is "C." Follow the dotted line to the keyboard and locate "C" on the piano. Find other notes the same way. Strike the notes as indicated and you'll play the melody of America.

FREE PRINT AND PICTURE SAMPLE

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC,
2945 Brunswick Bldg., New York 10, N. Y.

Please send me free booklet and Print and Picture Sample. I would like to play instrument checked below.

Piano	Piano Accordion	Modern Elementary Harmony
Guitar	Trumpet, Cornet	
Violin	Reed Organ	Clarinet
Saxophone	Tenor Banjo	Other Instrument

Name.....
(PLEASE PRINT)

Street.....

City.....Zone....State.....

WEST

Vol. 65, No. 1—MAY, 1947 A THRILLING PUBLICATION TWENTY-FIRST YEAR

COMPLETE NOVEL

THE WHIP

by Leslie Scott

It's "On to Nevada" when Texas cowboy Wade Harley inherits a broken-down coach line—and lar-rups in for the toughest battle of his life in order to prove that he's a right salty hombre who can take care of himself when sinister menace stalks! **11**

SHORT STORIES

ZORRO'S STRANGE DUEL ..... ***by Johnston McCulley*** **71**
A brutal taskmaster meets punishment when Don Diego Vega comes a-riding

WELCOME TO BOOTHILL ..... ***by Gunnison Steele*** **79**
There was enough leavening in Johnny Pine's biscuits to raise a ruckus

UNPREDICTABLE ARCHIE ..... ***by Stephen Payne*** **83**
Bellman of the Bell Ranch was a mystery, but Nora Preston understood him

THE GRIM VALLEY ..... ***by Harold F. Cruickshank*** **91**
The combined efforts of Tuk Cramer and Olak balk a base, vicious scheme

SPOOKS IS GOOFY HUMANS ..... ***by Joe Austell Small*** **100**
A booger's not a laughing matter when Frank Simpson builds it himself

AND

THE CHUCK WAGON ..... ***by Foghorn Clancy*** **6**
A ranch and rangeland gabfest conducted by a world-famous rodeo expert

Published monthly and copyright, 1947, by Better Publications, Inc., N. L. Pines, President, at 9 So. Clinton St., Chicago 6, Ill. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter July 13, 1945, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879. Title registered at U. S. Patent Office, Washington, D. C. Subscription yearly, $1.80; single copies, $.15; foreign postage extra. In corresponding with this publication please include your postal zone number, if any. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used it is a coincidence. Manuscripts must always be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

A stranger to her heart!
... but she knew she loved him more than anything else in the world!
The dramatic story of a girl in a man's world who taught a killer the real meaning of love!

JOHN **WAYNE** • GAIL **RUSSELL**

Angel and the BADMAN

with HARRY **CAREY** • BRUCE **CABOT** • IRENE **RICH** • LEE **DIXON**

STEPHEN GRANT • TOM POWERS • PAUL HURST

Written and Directed by James Edward Grant

A JOHN WAYNE PRODUCTION

A REPUBLIC PICTURE

Conducted By FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI WADDIES, once more we are banging on the old Chuck Wagon triangle to attract your attention so that we can invite you over for a gabfest around the old rangeland cafeteria.

While each season of the fast-progressing sport of rodeo is expected to be better than the one preceding, it would be almost too much to ask that the 1947 season eclipse that of 1946, for 1946 was far and away above any previous season in the 58 years that the sport has been going on in this country. It remains to be seen if rodeo can keep the high spot in attendance and receipts that it enjoyed last year.

Many rodeo producers are of the opinion that this is the year that the rodeo business will level off and get more on a permanent basis. They believe that receipts will drop to some extent, as it hardly seems possible that the public can go on this year spending the same great amount of money for amusement that they spent in the year just finished.

Champions of 1946

The champions of 1946 have not yet been announced, or crowned, as all the returns from all the year's rodeos are not yet in. The Rodeo Cowboys Association, which awards the championships and trophies on the total amount of points won during the season in the various events by the different contestants, can't make an award until all the results are officially sent in by the arena secretaries or managers of the different rodeos. At the last compiling of the points in December, Royce Sewalt was leading for the title of Champion calf roper, Dave Campbell was the leader in the steer wrestling, Pee Wee Morris was leading in bull riding, Jerry Ambler in saddle bronc riding, Bud Linderman in bareback bronc riding, Everett Shaw in steer roping, and Chuck Sheppard in team roping.

If these men who were leading in December keep that lead when all points are in, Bud Linderman and Everett Shaw will be the only two champions of 1945 to repeat in 1946. Bud won the bareback bronc riding title in '45 and Everett the steer roping title.

Bill Linderman, who won the bronc riding title, also the all around title, was in bad health most of last year and did not make much of a showing. Homer Pettigrew, the steer wrestling champ, went into a slump after winning the title for four years in succession, and is practically out of the running.

Ken Roberts, the bull riding champ, spent quite a bit of his time this past year in producing rodeos and did not contest at a sufficient number. However, he was in third place for the title on the last accounting. Toots Mansfield, the calf roping champ, still has a chance to repeat or did have when the December count was made, as he had won at a number of rodeos that had not yet sent in their reports and was in second place.

Fort Worth Stock Show

For several years, in fact for about twenty years, Verne Elliott and Eddie McCarty had produced the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show Rodeo. Then Elliott bought out McCarty, and later sold a half interest to Don Nesbitt, and they continued to furnish the stock and produce the Fort Worth Show.

In the meantime Everett Colborn, or Gene Autry and Associates, had for several years been producing the other big Texas rodeo at the Fat Stock Show at Houston. However, last year Elliott and Nesbitt secured the contract to produce the Houston show and Colborn and Autry secured the Fort Worth show. This year Colborn and Autry are producing both shows.

Johnny Baldwin, an old time rodeo contestant, is now located at Dalton, Pa., where he has a very fine dude ranch, riding stables, an indoor and outdoor arena. He is organizing a corral of Rodeo Fans of America and will put on a number of corral rodeos or horse shows this coming summer.

At a meeting of the Board of directors of the Rodeo Cowboys Association in New York

last fall, they voted to terminate their agreement with the Cowboys' Association of America (amateur). This agreement was to the effect that if any cowboy was blacklisted with the CAA he could not enter any contest approved by the RCA and vice-versa. As it now stands, any cowboy who is a member of the CAA and has contested at as many as one or two rodeos, must join the RCA before he can enter any more contests at approved RCA shows.

News of Rodeo Folks

Red Hammerschmidt, the cowboy who was shot at Kissimmee, Florida, in February of last year and who is now in the Tioga General Hospital at Waverly, N. Y., with paralysis from the waist down, caused by the shot severing his spinal cord, has his own Christmas tree in the hospital. His wife, Helen Hammerschmidt and their friends secured a fireproof tree, set it up by his bedside with presents galore. Most of the presents were cartons of cigarettes, as about all Red can do is smoke and talk reminiscently on rodeos of the past.

One of the fastest calf roping contests of the season took place at Corpus Christi, Texas, at the rodeo late last year. There were more than a hundred calf ropers, so many that one calf each was all that could be alloted to a roper. The day monies and finals both could be won on one calf. Jim Eskew, Jr., roped and tied a calf in 13 seconds, and this won him a split on third and fourth prizes both in the day money and the finals. Dee Burk, the winner, tied one in 12 2/5 seconds.

Tom Hickman, former captain of Company B. of the Texas Rangers, and a former rodeo judge—having gone to London, England, to judge the Tex Austin Rodeo in 1924—in the course of his career faced death many times. He came near drowning last December.

Tom, who lives at Gainesville, Texas, had forded a small river to get over to where he was feeding cattle. While he was feeding the animals the river rose and upon his return he started to swim his horse across the stream. The current was so swift that it swept the horse downstream. The animal was drowned and Hickman barely was able to swim across the stream, landing far down the stream, exhausted and almost half drowned.

The infant son of Brahma and Mary Rogers, rodeo clown and wife, which was born at Tyler, Texas, weighing only three pounds and five ounces, died when three weeks old. The Rogers were with the JE Ranch Rodeo last season.

[*Turn page*]

NEW SECURITY PLAN PAYS HOSPITAL & DOCTOR BILLS . . .

Costs only 3¢ a day!

PROTECTS YOU IN CASE OF SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT

INDIVIDUAL or FAMILY

Insure NOW, before it's too late! Protect your savings against Hospital expense. Here's an amazing offer of safe, dependable coverage under America's most popular Hospitalization Plan. Family or Individual eligible. No Medical Examination. When sickness or accident strikes, you may go to any Hospital in U. S. or Canada under any Doctor's care. YOUR EXPENSES WILL BE PAID exactly as Policy specifies. Many exceptional coverages included. The Company is under supervision of the Insurance Dept. No agents will call.

CASH BENEFITS INCLUDE

Hospital Room & Board Sickness or Accident Per Day Up to $6.00

Doctor Visits In Case of Accident Per Visit $3.00

Surgical Operations Up to $150.00

Time Lost from Work in Case of Accident Per Week $25.00

Accidental Death Up to $2000.00

Physical Disbursement. Up to $2000.00

MAIL COUPON AT ONCE!

NORTH AMERICAN MUTUAL INSURANCE CO.
Dept. TG7-5, Wilmington, Del.

Please send me, without obligation, details about your "3c A Day Hospitalization Insurance Plan"

Name.....

Address.....

City.....*State*.....

The Steady Pay Profession
Good Times or Bad!

SCIENTIFIC CRIME DETECTION

FOLLOW THIS MAN

Operator No. 38

It Is Easy to Learn!

I will teach you this fascinating science during your *spare time at home.* It pays to be an expert in Finger Printing, Firearms Identification, Police Photography and Secret Service Methods. I have trained hundreds of men and women now successfully serving in identification bureaus throughout America. You, too, may quickly prepare yourself to become a well-paid valued officer of the law, often sharing in the generous rewards offered for wanted criminals.

FREE!
"BLUE BOOK OF CRIME"
This book is full of exciting information on scientific crime detection. It will show how You can get started in a grand career. Now, at amazingly low cost. Clip coupon Now... Mail it today.

53 PER CENT
of all Identification Bureaus in the U. S. employ students and graduates of I. A. S. A majority of these men are heads of Bureaus. Many of them knew nothing about crime detection before training with me. Now they have steady jobs, good salaries and a fine future. Write today for full particulars and free book. Give age.

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7965, Chicago 40, Ill.

INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Ave., Dept. 7965, Chicago 40

Gentlemen: Without any obligation on my part, send me the "Blue Book of Crime," and complete list of Identification Bureaus employing your students or graduates, together with your low prices and Easy Terms Offer. (Literature will be sent ONLY to persons stating their age.)

Name.....

Address.....

.....Age.....

PLAY GUITAR LIKE THE COWBOYS DO... Only 8⅓¢ A Lesson

Just out—very latest guaranteed, simple, easy method. Play cowboy songs the Western way in a few minutes by ear. Surprise and amaze your friends. Be in big demand at *parties, camps, public entertainments, on the radio, etc.* 12 Complete Lessons. **SEND NO MONEY.** Pay postman only $1.00 plus postage and C.O.D. charges, or send $1.00 and get EXTRA SONGS all postpaid. (Canada, $1.25 money order only.) Nothing else to buy. Positive money back guarantee. *Rush order today.*

WESTERN RANGER STUDIOS, Dept. 475, Hutchinson, Kans.

INVENTORS

Learn how to protect your invention. A specially prepared booklet containing detailed information concerning patent protection and procedure with "Record of Invention" form will be forwarded to you upon request—without obligation.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
78-D District National Bldg. Washington 5, D. C.

Get into Good Paying
AUTO BODY and FENDER WORK

BIG DEMAND in Auto Body and Fender work. Start training now in your spare time at home for good pay work. Practical shop experience included. U.E.I. Training covers metal work, welding, painting, etc. Placement service—or we will show you how to start your own shop. Behind U.E.I. TRAINING is a large national organization founded 1927. Write today for FREE FACTS—No obligation.

Approved for Training under G.I. Bill

AUTO-CRAFTS DIVISION • **UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE**
1314 BELDEN AVENUE, DEPT. X-7W, CHICAGO 14, ILLINOIS

Buck Dowell and wife Carol spent several weeks in Waverly, New York, following the rodeo at Boston, then went south to join other rodeo folks playing the Florida rodeos. Mrs. Dowell is the former Carol Aiken. She attended art schools in both Philadelphia and New York and has a number of very fine sketches and paintings to her credit.

A baby boy was born to Mr. and Mrs. Homer Harris, at East Chicago, Indiana, weighing seven pounds and eleven ounces, and was named Thomas John. Homer is a steer wrestler, bull rider and clown.

Pee Wee Morris and wife Josephine are wintering in Greencastle, Indiana, after a very successful rodeo season. It looks like Pee Wee has annexed the title of World's Champion Bull Rider.

Clay Lewis, rodeo stock contractor, was killed in an auto accident near Dearborn, Michigan, in December.

Matched Steer Roping

The recent matched steer roping for a $10,000 side purse between Carl Arnold, of Buckeye, Arizona, and Ike Rude of Buffalo, Oklahoma, at the Tucson Arena, Tucson, Arizona, was won by Arnold.

The match was sponsored by Richard Merchant and Otho Kinsley. There was also a purse of $2,000 for Dick Griffith to ride the famous Kinsley speckled bull. Griffith is supposed to have put up half the purse on the bull ride and was to receive the entire amount if he made a successful contest ride, and in case he failed to make the ride the purse was to have gone to the owner of the bull. But Dick saved the owner the trouble of having to bank the money, as he made the ride and pocketed the roll.

Jim Eskew, Jr., claimant of the title of world's champion fancy roper, who was discharged from the armed forces, where he was in special service about a year ago, has been booked to do fancy roping at the Fort Worth Fat Stock Show Rodeo. Jim, Jr., was with the JE Ranch Rodeo which is owned by his father, and with the Roy Rogers Rodeo during the 1946 season. He is a dazzling performer when it comes to fancy roping, one of the fastest calf ropers in rodeo. He started steer wrestling during the past season and was very successful in this event.

Among the rodeo producers and stock contractors in Florida this winter are Tommy Horner, Lester Cubbadge, Oscar Clemans, Vic Blackstone, Cecil Yates, Larry Sunrock and Cliff Gatewood. Some of the contestants who are playing that state's rodeos include Buddy Mefford, Jack Kennedy, Dick and Nancy Dyer, Chip and Edith Clancy.

A Big Winner

Gene Rambo, one of the greatest cowboys that the state of California ever produced, was the big winner at the Cow Palace Rodeo in San Francisco. His winnings put him in the lead for the title of champion All-Around Cowboy in the International Rodeo Association point award system. He entered practically all contest events of the rodeo, won the bronc riding, calf roping and steer wrestling, winning about $5,000 in prize money. He also won two silver-mounted saddles, both trophies of the show, one being for the all around championship of the show, the other the Grand National Championship. He also succeeded in winning a gold and silver belt buckle, a silver mounted bridle, and two other gold and silver belt buckles, one a trophy in the bronc riding and the other a trophy in steer wrestling.

Champions of Tomorrow

The amateurs of today may be the champions of tomorrow. The boy with the most unimportant job in an enterprise may be the manager or owner years later.

Twenty-seven years ago a young fellow who lived in a small Missouri town, and who had been studying and practising fancy roping, went to a big rodeo at Saint Joseph, Mo. He wanted to enter the fancy roping contest and the ropers he would have to enter against were Johnny Judd, Montana Jack Ray, Tommy Kirnan, and others who were the best of that time. This lad was so green in the rodeo game that he actually asked the rodeo producers if the judges would give a fellow as much credit for spinning a small loop as they would for spinning a big one.

The lad was smart, only just green about rodeos. He entered the roping, but had no sooner seen the other ropers at work than he knew he did not have a chance to win anything. However he stuck it out, paid more attention to the other ropers than he did to his own roping, and learned a lot.

He took that knowledge home with him as his pay, and practised diligently. Two years later he was working in rodeos as a fancy roper. Now he has a rodeo family as well as a saddle-making business. He is Monroe Veach of Trenton, Missouri, and for a number of years he and his son Billy have been producing contract rodeos in and around Trenton.

They have had a very successful season in 1946 and are looking forward to a much bigger season in 1947. No doubt Monroe has had many a laugh over that rodeo at St. Joseph, and it is a fair guess that any young-

(Continued on page 107)

To People who want to write *but can't get started*

Do you have that constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance. Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

"There is more room for newcomers in the writing field today than ever before. Some of the greatest of writing men and women have passed from the scene in recent years. Who will take their places? Who will be the new Robert W. Chambers, Edgar Wallace, Rudyard Kipling? Fame, riches and the happiness of achievement await the new men and women of power."

HAD NEVER WRITTEN A LINE SELLS ARTICLE BEFORE COMPLETING COURSE

"Before completing the N. I. A. course, I sold a feature to Screenland Magazine for $50. That resulted in an immediate assignment to do another for the same magazine. After gaining confidence with successive feature stories, I am now working into the fiction field. Previous to enrolling in the N. I. A., I had never written a line for publication, nor seriously expected to do so."—Gene E. Levant, 116 West Ave. 28, Los Angeles, Calif.

Writing Aptitude Test — FREE!

THE Newspaper Institute of America offers a free Writing Aptitude Test. Its object is to discover new recruits for the army of men and women who add to their income by fiction and article writing. The Writing Aptitude Test is a simple but expert analysis of your latent ability, your powers of imagination, logic, etc. Not all applicants pass this test. Those who do are qualified to take the famous N. I. A. course based on the *practical* training given by big metropolitan dailies.

This is the New York Copy Desk Method which teaches you to write by writing. You develop your *individual* style instead of trying to copy that of others. You "cover" actual assignments such as metropolitan reporters get. Although you work at home, on your own time, you are constantly guided by experienced writers. It is really fascinating work. Each week you see new progress. In a matter of months you can acquire the coveted "professional" touch. Then you're ready for market with greatly improved chances of making sales.

VETERANS
THIS COURSE APPROVED FOR VETERANS' TRAINING

Mail the Coupon Now

But the first step is to take the Writing Aptitude Test. It requires but a few minutes and costs nothing. So mail the coupon now. Make the first move towards the most enjoyable and profitable occupation—writing for publication! Newspaper Institute of America, One Park Avenue, New York 16, N. Y. (Founded 1925)

Free

Newspaper Institute of America
One Park Ave., New York 16, N. Y.

Send me, without cost or obligation, your Writing Aptitude Test and further information about writing for profit.

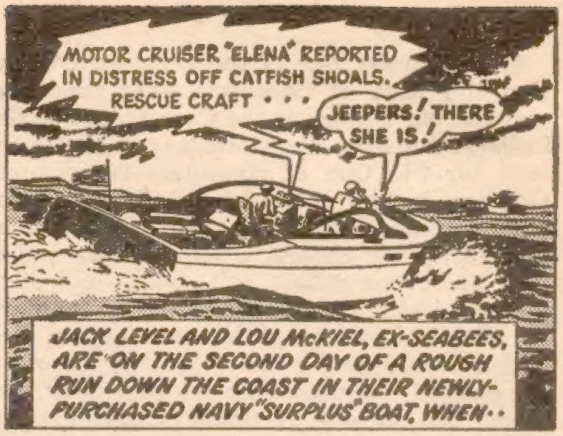
Mr.
Mrs.
Miss .....

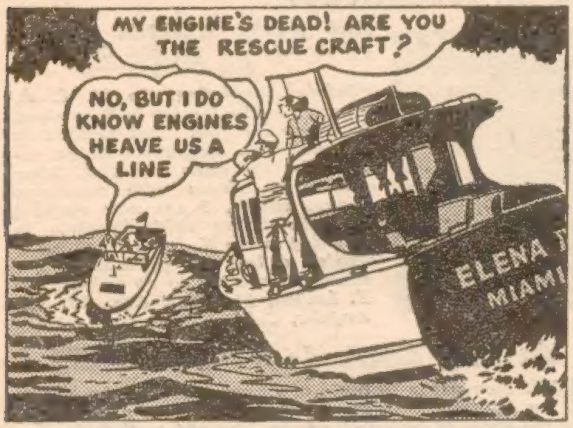
Address .....

( ) Check here if you are eligible under the G.I. Bill of Rights.
(All correspondence confidential. No salesman will call on you.) 94-E-667

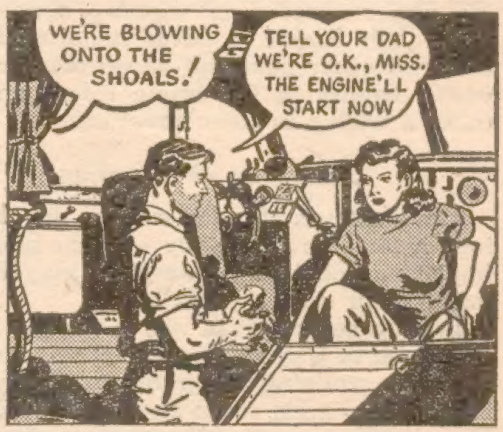
Copyright 1947, Newspaper Institute of America.

JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...

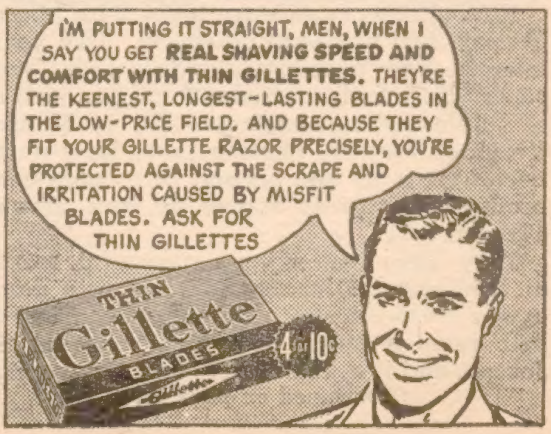

MOTOR CRUISER "ELENA" REPORTED IN DISTRESS OFF CATFISH SHOALS. RESCUE CRAFT...
JEEPERS! THERE SHE IS!
JACK LEVEL AND LOU McKIEL, EX-SEABEES, ARE ON THE SECOND DAY OF A ROUGH RUN DOWN THE COAST IN THEIR NEWLY-PURCHASED NAVY "SURPLUS" BOAT, WHEN..



20 MINUTES LATER



WE PLAN TO FIX UP OUR TUB AND START A FISHING SERVICE
THAT'S A WASTE OF TALENT. MY CONSTRUCTION FIRM NEEDS MEN LIKE YOU
HE'S CERTAINLY HANDSOME


I'M PUTTING IT STRAIGHT, MEN, WHEN I SAY YOU GET REAL SHAVING SPEED AND COMFORT WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. AND BECAUSE THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, YOU'RE PROTECTED AGAINST THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢

With a snort of protest and a scream of fear that was almost human, Rojo sprang straight out over the lip of the rock wall (CHAPTER II)

THE WHIP

By LESLIE SCOTT

It's "On to Nevada" when Texas cowboy Wade Harley inherits a broken-down coach line—and larrups in for the toughest battle of his life to prove that he's a right salty hombre!

CHAPTER I

The Devil's Helper

OLD John Arbuckle's voice droned on as he read the document he held in his hands.

". . . and to my nephew, Wade Harley, I bequeath the property known as the Great Divide Stage Coach Company in the fervent hope that it may either make a man of him or help him to the devil within six months, or as soon after as may be."

Old Arbuckle paused in his reading to glance over the rim of his spectacles at the young man seated on the opposite side of his desk. In his frosty eyes was decided disapproval.

Young Wade Harley was not exactly a prepossessing-looking person at the moment. His face was haggard, darkened by a three-days' growth of black beard, drawn about the rather wide mouth. As he rolled a cigarette, his hand shook until the tobacco spilled upon the floor. His nostrils twitched with nervousness. But his rather long, black-lashed eyes of a peculiar shade of green met the lawyer's gaze unflinchingly.

"Sounds like Uncle Andy," he remarked in a deep, musical voice, a fitting voice to come out of his broad chest.

Old John frowned disapprovingly.

"It would appear yore uncle didn't think too well of you, Wade," he remarked.

Harley grinned, his even teeth flashing startlingly white against the deep bronze of his cheeks, his lean, hawklike face suddenly very pleasing.

"Well," he replied, "I reckon that isn't far from the truth. When he visited me here last spring, I'd just finished up a bust with Matt Dickson and the boys, sort of like the one I've just been on. I've a notion I didn't look or act my best. Uncle Andy didn't say anything. Yuh know he never was much on talkin', but I got the idea that he didn't exactly approve."

John Arbuckle looked grim.

"I've a notion no decent citizen would approve of Matthew Dickson and his bunch," he observed caustically.

"Oh, Matt's all right," Harley replied. "He's been good to me."

"Matthew Dickson was never good to anybody except Matthew Dickson," old John disagreed emphatically. "I've a notion yuh're due to find that out, Wade," he added with a tight and cryptic smile.

Wade Harley chose to change the subject.

"What about the big ranch he told me about, the Bradded H, and his minin' properities?" he asked, apropos of the deceased Andrew Harley.

OLD John smiled again, this time almost with a touch of malicious mischief. He appeared to be thoroughly enjoying himself in his own taciturn way. He glanced back at the paper he held in his hand and read in his sonorous voice:

"The further provisions of this will are to be read six months from the date of the first readin'."

The old Texas lawyer again glanced over his spectacles, folded the paper and laid it on his desk. Wade Harley stared at him in bewilderment.

"That's—that's all?" he asked unbelievingly.

The lawyer's voice was precise. "That is all."

Wade Harley sat staring in front of him. Old John's voice again broke the silence.

"Yore uncle sent yuh through college, I believe."

"That's right." Harley nodded. "Wanted me to be an engineer."

"You graduated, not exactly *magna cum laude*."

The fleeting grin again passed across Harley's lean face.

"Not exactly," he agreed, "but I did manage to get through."

"And have never put yore knowledge to any practical use."

Harley nodded, soberly this time.

"Never have," he admitted. "I reckon I should have, but I reckon, too, mebbe there's too much grass rope and saddle leather in my blood for me to be content away from the range. Dad was a cowman, yuh know, and so was his father before him, and on back for quite a ways."

John Arbuckle nodded his understanding, and there was a reminiscent and slightly wistful gleam in his frosty eyes. For in his youth, before he thought of attending law school and achieving a not inconsiderable reputation as a barrister, Arbuckle had himself been a rider of the purple sage. His accent still held a tang of the range, as did young Wade Harley's.

"Doubtless yore uncle was not particularly pleased with yore lack of—ambition," the lawyer observed.

"Right again," Harley agreed.

Arbuckle changed the subject.

"I have here," he said, "the necessary papers relative to yore takin' over the property willed yuh."

He passed a packet to Harley, who took it mechanically and slipped it into his pocket.

"I suppose," resumed the lawyer, "that yuh will immediately leave Texas to take charge of the stage-coach line. Its headquarters are quite some ways from here—Virginia City, in Nevada."

Harley's face darkened.

"Ride nigh onto a thousand miles to take charge of a run down stage-coach line!" he growled. "I'm hanged if I do! I reckon I can manage to get to the devil within a year,

The cumbersome coach rocked wildly, the mules went down in a welter of kicking and squealing and tangled harness (CHAPTER VI)

or a sight sooner, without Uncle Andy's help."

He stood up, towering over John Arbuckle, who was himself a bulky six-footer.

"I'm goin' over to the Ace Full and see Matt", he said. "So long."

John Arbuckle watched his tall, broad-shouldered form pass lithely through the doorway, and his grizzled brows drew together. At the door Harley paused to hitch his double cartridge belts a little higher about his lean waist, the black butts of the long-barreled .45's flaring out from his sinewy hips as he did so.

With an instinctive gesture, he dropped his slender hands to the gun butts and snugged them more securely into their carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters. Then he turned sharply to the left and vanished from the lawyer's view.

"Takes after his dad in more ways than one," Arbuckle muttered. "Weston Harley was the best shot and the fastest man on the draw in this section. Also he had about the flashiest temper. Reckon Wade isn't far behind him in either respect. Blast Matthew Dickson, anyhow! Wade didn't inherit a taste for red-eye and cards from old Weston. Reckon those were acquired, and Matt Dickson helped plenty with the acquirin'."

For a moment the lawyer stood beside his desk, his big head bent forward, apparently pondering some step. Then abruptly he seemed to arrive at a decision. He crossed the room with a swing to his stride and a spring to his step that showed he had not yet altogether lost the fire of his youth.

He took an old Russian Model Smith & Wesson from a hook and buckled it around his waist under his long black coat. Then he left his office, banging the door shut after him, and hurried down the street in the direction Wade Harley had taken.

WHEN Harley entered the Ace Full, the big room was fairly well crowded, despite the fact it was but early afternoon.

Standing near the far end of the bar was Matthew Dickson, the owner.

Dickson was a giant of a man with a beefy face, a tight mouth, and hard little gray eyes set deep in rolls of fat. He waved a greeting to the cowboy.

"Well," he rumbled as Harley drew near, "how does it feel to be a rich man?"

Harley shrugged his broad shoulders. "Reckon you can answer that one better'n I can," he replied morosely.

Dickson looked hard at him.

"I understand old Andy wasn't exactly poverty stricken," he returned.

"Reckon he wasn't," Harley agreed, "but that doesn't seem to have much to do with me."

"What yuh mean?" Dickson demanded.

"I mean that, so far as I can see, he didn't leave me anything except some sort of a loco stage-coach line way over in Nevada," Harley returned.

Dickson's teeth clamped hard on his cigar a moment, then he rolled it between his thin lips.

"Yuh mean to tell me he didn't will his dinero to you as yuh expected?"

"Looks that way, Matt."

"And it looks like the two thousand yuh got into me for is trailin' a loose rope, eh?" Dickson remarked, an unpleasant note apparent in his rumbling voice.

"Yuh mean the two thousand yuh won from me at poker," Harley corrected.

"Yuh had yore chance to win two thousand from me," Dickson returned. "I thought I was riskin' my money against money, figgerin' yuh'd be plenty able to take up yore notes when the old man's will was read. Looks like I'm left holdin' a poke. The cussed old goat! Or did yuh know all along that this was goin' to happen?"

Wade Harley flushed and his green eyes seemed subtly to change color, but his voice was quiet when he replied.

"It was as much of a surprise to me at it is to you, Matt," he said.

"Uh-huh, but what about my two thousand?"

"Well," Harley said, "it looks like the only thing I can do is go to work and pay yuh off as I can."

"At cowhand's wages!" Dickson sneered. "Yuh'd be a hundred before yuh got it settled up."

The flush on Harley's bronzed face deepened, but he said nothing. Dickson rolled his cigar, stared at the cowboy in a speculative way.

"I got a notion I can put yuh to work for me," he said. "At work where yuh won't have any trouble gettin' the two thousand together. Yuh're sort of handy with the pasteboards, Harley. All yuh need is a mite of coachin'."

Harley stared at him.

"Yuh mean a job of crooked dealin'?" he asked softly.

"Ain't exactly a nice way to put it, but I reckon yuh get the general notion," Dickson returned, with a shrug of his heavy shoulders.

Harley continued to stare at the saloonkeeper. Finally he spoke, his voice hard and brittle.

"Matt," he said, "yuh can go plumb to the devil!"

Dickson's eyes popped open. He glared at the cowboy. His great hands balled into knotted fists.

"Why, yuh cussed welchin' skunk!" he bellowed.

Harley hit him, with both hands, hard. Dickson reeled back, caromed off a table and crashed to the floor. He bounded to his feet with a roar of fury, hand streaking to his gun.

At the same instant, Wade Harley's hands flashed down and up. The two reports blended in a thunderclap of sound. Harley's hat tipped slightly on his head. Matthew Dickson reeled back with a bubbling cry and slumped to the floor, blood dyeing the white front of his shirt and frothing his lips.

CHAPTER II

Westward Bound

INSTANTLY the barroom was in an uproar. Chairs crashed to the floor as men came to their feet, shouting and cursing. The bartenders reached under the bar. Dealers at the tables straightened up, hands stealing toward their armpits.

Wade Harley flickered glances around the room. He held a gun in each hand, the black muzzle of the left one still wisping smoke. He was backed against the end of the bar, but he could not keep both the bartenders and the other occupants of the room under his eyes.

At his elbow sounded a deep-toned roar: "Hold it!"

Old John Arbuckle was beside him, his long-barreled Smith trained on the barkeeps, who abruptly stopped "reaching". Arbuckle had a reputation that did not depend on his success as a lawyer. In his youth he had been as tough a gun fighter as the Texas Panhandle had ever known. And he was a dead shot.

Arbuckle spoke to Harley in low tones.

"Start backin' to the door," he directed. "Take yore time—there's no hurry, but keep goin' once yuh start, and keep a close eye on those tinhorns at the tables. I'll keep the bar covered. Get goin'!"

Harley obeyed, reluctantly. His mouth was set in a hard line. His eyes were now the color of frosted steel.

With the steady gaze of Harley and Arbuckle upon them, and the unwavering gun muzzles yawning in their direction, the dealers made no move. Harley and the old lawyer shoved through the swinging doors shoulder to shoulder.

Old John holstered his gun and gripped his young companion by the arm.

"Yore hoss is hitched in front of my office, right?" he said. "You fork him and ride—ride fast—out of town, out of this part of the country."

"I'll be dog-goned if I will!" growled Harley. "I shot in self-defense—anybody could see that."

"Lots of good it will do yuh," Arbuckle returned, propelling him up the street by main strength. "Matthew Dickson runs things hereabouts. He got Tom Crane elected sheriff and all Crane's deputies are Dickson's men. Yuh think they'd protect yuh when Dickson's friends came after yuh? If yuh stay here, yuh'll be the main attraction of a necktie party. Here's yore hoss. Wait a minute. Watch the street till I get back."

He dived into the building that was his office and his living quarters. In a few minutes he returned with a bundle and several articles in his hands.

"Bacon, flour, a sack of beans, coffee, salt, and tobacco," he said. "And here's a skillet and a little bucket. I figger yuh'll be doin' some campin' out for a spell. Stow 'em in yore saddlebags. Now fork that cayuse and get goin'. Yuh got no time to waste."

Shouts were sounding down the street. Harley hesitated, then swung into saddle. He reached down and gripped the old lawyer's hand.

"Thanks, John," he said. "I figger I don't deserve what yuh're doin' for me, but I appreciate it just the same. I'll be seein' yuh."

"Keep in touch with me, after yuh get safe in the clear," the lawyer returned. "*Adios!*"

As Harley rode swiftly up the street, the street that continued on westward as the Coronado Trail, John Arbuckle gazed after him, a pleased expression on his old face. He chuckled deep in his throat.

"Old Andy Harley had plenty of wrinkle's on his horns," he observed aloud. "Uh-huh, he had plenty of savvy, but I reckon he never figgered a sidewinder like Matt Dickson would lend him a hand. Funny how things work out. . . ."

TWO THE west of the town of Webb, the trail wound through a stand of dense and high chaparral. In no place could Wade Harley see ahead or behind for more than a hundred yards. The track was rough and rutted, but nevertheless he sent his great red sorrel along at a fast clip.

Some two miles beyond the town the trail writhed up a long slope. On the crest of the slope he pulled up his horse for a breather. Turning, he stared back the way he had come. His eyes narrowed slightly as he caught sight of a yellow dust cloud boiling up from the growth and rolling steadily toward him.

"Well, Rojo," he told the sorrel, "it didn't take Tom Crane long to get a posse together. They're on our trail, feller, but I don't figger we got much to worry about, unless you break a leg or somethin'. Mighty glad I had my saddle gun along," he added, one hand caressing the sleek stock of the heavy Winchester snugged in the boot. "We may need it before dark. Let's go, feller."

With a shake of the bridle he sent the sorrel down the far slope of the sag. Soon afterward he passed a ranchhouse and, as he progressed, others hove into view.

Despite the fact that Sheriff Crane was known as a grim and tenacious trailer, Harley was not particularly perturbed. He knew that the great sorrel could easily outstrip anything on four legs in the country. His plan was to keep his distance, saving his horse, and then give the posse the slip under cover of darkness.

From time to time he glanced back at the dust cloud and gauged his horse's pace to its relative position. Once or twice, from the crests of rises, he glimpsed the bobbing black dots that were the sheriff's hard riding possemen.

For a long time he easily maintained the two mile or so lead. But as the afternoon wore on, he realized that the posse was slowly but surely closing the distance, although Rojo was giving his best. His brows drew together as he recalled the widely spaced ranchhouses he had passed.

"The hellions are grabbin' off fresh hosses from the spreads they pass, that's it," he muttered. "Feller, this is gettin' so it isn't funny any more."

He glanced anxiously at the westering sun. There were still several hours of daylight, and the posse was steadily gaining on him. The mile lead had been cut in half.

"Somethin's got to be done about it," he growled, studying the terrain ahead.

The trail wound on, a gray ribbon amid the vivid green of the rangeland and the dustier green of the growth. It would wind thus for untold miles, this old trail that was first ridden by the iron men of Spain in their search for golden treasure.

Gradually the country became more broken. The rises were more frequent, the sags steeper. Rojo, despite his iron endurance, was beginning to labor. And still the posse crept nearer.

They topped a craggy crest and Harley, glancing back, could make out the features of the nearly a dozen men who rode in pursuit. Down the opposite slope, Rojo gained on them, but up the steep opposite sag the fresher horses had the advantage.

Wade Harley was very near to the crest when something whined viciously overhead. To his ears came the crack of a rifle. He bent low in the saddle and urged his flagging horse to greater speed.

He reached the crest, with Rojo blowing and snorting. The sorrel's glorious red-golden coat was dark with sweat and flecked with foam. His nostrils flared, his eyes were red with congested blood. But he tossed his head gallantly and strained against the bit.

On the hilltop, Harley pulled him to a halt. He turned him to face the approaching riders, slid his long Winchester from the boot.

"Hate to do this," he muttered as his green eyes glanced along the sights, "but it's them or us, Rojo. We haven't got much choice, feller."

Holding low, he squeezed the trigger. The rifle barked, a fleck of dust kicked up directly in front of the charging posse, and excited yells from the men came faintly to Harley's ears. Spurts of smoke shot from their ranks, lead whined about Harley, one or two of the lethal messengers coming close

enough to fan his face with their breath. He elevated the rifle muzzle a trifle and pulled trigger a second time.

Hardly had the rifle cracked when a horse in the front ranks of the posse dived headlong to the ground, flinging his rider from the hull like a stone from a sling. Two other horses crashed over the stricken animal and went down. Another stumbled to his knees, unseating his rider. The posse was instantly in a wild tangle of confusion.

HARLEY slid his rifle back into the boot, whirling Rojo.

"That'll hold 'em for a few minutes and give us a mite of a start," he muttered. "Sorry for that poor cayuse, but there was no help for it."

He sent the red horse charging down the sag, his keen eyes sweeping the surrounding terrain. Just as the raging posse topped the rise, he spied what he had been searching for. A dark canyon mouth yawned on the right, hemmed by perpendicular walls, its boulder-dotted, brush-grown floor slanting upward.

"If that darn hole doesn't turn out to be a box, mebbe it'll give us a chance," he told his horse. "They'll run us down before dark shore if we stick to the trail."

He turned the sorrel and headed him into the canyon. Soon Rojo was dodging and weaving between the rocks and clumps of brush. He was breathing heavily, with heaving sides and trembling flanks. He was giving his best but Harley knew that Rojo was about at the end of his endurance. He glanced anxiously over his shoulder and saw the distant possemen bobbing about in his wake.

"Gainin' on us, all right," he decided. "Hoss, things don't look so good."

The canyon floor continued to ascend gently, but the side walls were even more towering, and were absolutely perpendicular. Harley searched the scene ahead, fearful of seeing the black loom of the end wall that would declare the gorge a box with no egress. He loosened his rifle in the boot and his mouth set in a grim line. He was determined not to be taken alive. He would fight for life as long as he had a bullet left.

He reached what was apparently the crest

Harley warded off the lunging steel with the barrel of his Colt, then slashed downward with the clubbed six (CHAPTER XIX)

of the rising floor and breathed a deep sigh of relief. He could see now that the canyon was not a box, but continued indefinitly into the west.

"Just hold on for a while, feller," he told Rojo, "and we'll get a last card for our money. Another hour or so and it'll be gettin' dark then we'll have a chance to give 'em the slip."

The abruptly he swore a bitter oath. He had rounded a straggle of tall brush and saw, only a few hundred yards ahead, a wide gorge cutting the canyon floor from south to north. The cleft was too wide for Rojo to jump it, and a glance told him the walls were absolutely sheer. He was trapped! And right when a last hope had leaped in his heart.

Grimly he sent the red horse charging right to the lip of the fissure. He glanced down the perpendicular wall. Some fifty feet below was a gleam of dark water. Nowhere within sight was a place where descent was possible. The wall was as sheer as though it had been sliced off by a giant hand.

Behind him sounded the exultant yells of the posse. Lead began whistling past him once more. He turned in the saddle, reached for his rifle. Then abruptly he turned back.

"Feller, we got one chance," he told the sorrel. "If we take it, and the water's shallow down there, we're done for!" His mouth became taut with grim determination. "But we're done for anyhow. We got to take the risk!"

He gathered up the reins, tightened his grip, clumped his thighs hard against the great horse's swelling barrel. His voice rang out, clear, compelling:

"Take it, feller!"

Rojo took it, with a snort of protest and a scream of fear that was almost human. He bunched his hoofs beneath him, swelled his giant muscles and sprang straight out over the lip of the rock wall. Harley heard the astounded yells of the sheriff's posse as they shot downward. Then the wild shouts were torn away by the diabolic roaring of the wind.

Down, they rushed, down, down, the air screaming in their ears, Rojo's glossy mane tossing wildly. The black water rushed upward to meet them like a living thing. Harley could see the ominous shapes of jagged fangs of stone thrusting above the surface. He held his breath and set his teeth in anticipation of the rending crash that would leave horse and man mere masses of splintred bones and mangled flesh.

They hit the water with a mighty splash, tore downward through its yielding and upholding substance. A mighty surge of relief welled in Harley's breast. They had missed the rocks. And the water was deep!

Down, down they went, slowly and more slowly. Harley felt sure that Rojo's irons hit the bottom of the stream before their progress was arrested. Then they began to rise, but with terrifying slowness. Harley slipped from the hull, gripped Rojo's mane and grimly held on, with bursting lungs and throbbing temples.

A bloody mist swirled before his eyes. A hot iron band tightened and tightened about his chest. His heart jumped and pounded.

Rojo's frantic struggles were weakening. The great horse half-turned onto his side. Harley hauled him onto an even keel once more with a final output of his last iota of strength. His fingers were slipping from their hold. His arm felt like a cold bar of lead.

It was all over. It must be!

CHAPTER III

Helldorado

JUST as a wave of icy blackness was shrouding Wade Harley's mind in clammy folds he and Rojo broke surface with a mighty upward surge. Harley gulped a lungful of life-giving air before they submerged again, this time for only a few seconds. Then the current gripped them and hurled them downstream with frightful force.

A few bullets fired by the cursing posse on the lip of the cliff cut the water behind them. Then they were out of range.

But the stream ran like a millrace and the water was icily cold. Soon Harley began to grow numb. The great horse struggled madly, but Harley could tell that Rojo's strength was swiftly failing.

On either side the walls of black rock rose sheer. The water roared and thundered over partially submerged boulders and beat

Harley's face with choking spray.

Again that clammy blackness coiled about his brain. His fingers, now utterly devoid of feeling, loosened. He lost his grip on Rojo's mane and plunged under. He made a frantic grab and secured another hold, but almost immediately his hand began to slip once more.

A sudden blaze of sunlight dazzled him. He felt Rojo swerve sharply to the right. And in another instant the mount's irons rang on stone. Reeling, gasping, horse and man floundered drunkenly through the shallowing water, to fall exhaused at length on a stretch of sandy beach that edged the rushing water.

Harley's strength quickly returned. He raised his head and stared about. A wide cleft cut the west wall of the north-by-south canyon where he had found sanctuary. Through the cleft poured the red rays of the setting sun. The side canyon wound on through the hills toward the fiery sunset. This canyon was brush-grown, with sloping sides, and was of considerable width.

"Lots of wood over there," Harley told the breath-laboring Rojo, as he poured the water from his boots. "We'll get a fire goin' and dry out, and cook some supper. Lucky I got my matches in a corked bottle that didn't get busted. Otherwise we'd have to knock sparks off a chunk of rock to get a light. Come on, feller, the grass looks prime over there, too."

As though Rojo understood, he got staggeringly to his feet.

Under an overhang of rock Harley soon got a roaring fire going, beside which his soaked clothing steamed. He was examining his camp supplies, and nodded with satisfaction. John Arbuckle, an old campaigner, had carefully wrapped flour and coffee in a piece of discarded slicker, and though somewhat dampened, neither was unfit for use.

Very shortly, bacon was sizzling in the skillet, and coffee steaming in the little bucket. Harley chuckled, his green eyes sunny again. He stood up beside the fire in his naked might. Long, powerful muscles leaped out on back and shoulder as he stretched his arms above his head.

He faced the west, and chuckled again, looking across the endless vistas of hills toward the unseen Rockies and Sierra Nevadas beyond the horizon.

"Uncle Andy usually got whatever he went after, in one way or another," he remarked aloud. "Reckon he didn't fail up this time. Hoss, we're goin' places!"

Nearly a thousand miles of wild and desolate country lay between him and his goal—miles of hardship and danger, but there was a light in Wade Harley's eyes that was not a reflected light of the sunset as his voice rang out, gay and carefree:

"Nevada, here we come!"

With a light heart, when morning came again, Wade Harley set a dead course on the long, perilous trail for Virginia City, that fabulous Eldorado to which so many men's eager hearts and footsteps had been drawn, men hypnotized by the argent lure of silver deep in the dark heart of the frowning mountains. But it was not that store of wealth which was the magnet for the Texas cowboy. It was free life—and adventure. . . .

THE first twenty-six graves in the Virginia City cemetery were occupied by men who had died by violence—who had been killed.

This, a single sentence, epitomizes the early history of the roaring silver city roosting royally midway up the steep side of Mount Davidson, seven thousand two hundred feet above the level of the sea. In the clear Nevada atmosphere it was visible from a distance of fifty miles.

The mountainside was so steep that the entire town had a slant in it like a roof. Each street was a terrace, forty or fifty feet above the one below. A man could stand at a rear first floor window of a C Street house and look down the chimneys of the row of houses below, facing D Street.

From the city's situation, the view was magnificent, a vast, far-reaching panorama of mountain ranges and deserts. Mighty Mount Davidson, lifting his gray dome to the heavens, was but one of many comely brothers.

Through a somber canyon that split the battlemented hills, a fantastically tinted desert could be seen. Through it wound a silver streak of river bordered by trees whose foliage became a delicate tracery in the distance. Farther beyond, a full fifty miles, a lake burned in the desert like a fallen sun, and beyond the lake the snowy mountains rose tier on tier to the thin fine line of the horizon.

On the lofty summit of Mount Davidson, the flag that had flown there since Civil War days flaunted its crimson bars and silver

stars in the wind that roared over the mountain crest, looking like a tiny tongue of flame from Virginia's streets, although it was thirty-five feet long and ten feet wide.

When Wade Harley, lean and sun-blackened, his gaunt face covered with a heavy black beard, dusty and travel-stained but bright of eye and glowing with rugged health, rode into Virginia City in the first light of morning, the town was still near the height of its prosperity. The great Comstock lode stretched its opulent length straight through the town from north to south. Every mine on it poured forth its riches, while new strikes at Humboldt, Esmeralda, and other points were shrieking for attention.

Night and day the buildings of the town quivered to the jar of blasts set off deep in the earth beneath it. For the miners worked in three shifts and the turning hands of the clock never noted a moment of inactivity in the vast subterranean galleries of the gutted lode.

Large, fire-proof brick buildings were nearing completion on the principle streets, and the wooden suburbs were spreading out in all directions. The railroad had arrived some years before to tap the Comstock, but the great coaches of the Overland Stage still rumbled in from the east and north.

Harley found a livery stable on Mill Street, just off C Street, the main thoroughfare. Here he was assured that all of Rojo's wants would be provided for. Despite his own trail weariness, the comfort of the red sorrel was his first consideration, as always.

"He's shore some hoss, feller," declared the wizened old stablekeeper, reaching a fearless hand to stroke the sorrel's velvety nose. "I'll look after him like he was my old dad's ghost. Don't yuh worry about him."

"Takes to yuh, all right, I see." Harley nodded approvingly. "I usually find I can depend on a jigger Rojo takes to. Thanks, old-timer. Be seein' yuh later. Want to put on the nosebag myself now. My stomach is figgerin' my throat's been sewed up."

He repaired to a restaurant already open for business and enjoyed the first decent meal he had eaten in a long, long time. So long a time that it seemed he had lost count of days.

"The Great Divide Stage Coach Company?" the counterman replied to his question. "Their station is down at the west end of Taylor Street, close to the corner of Summit. Bill Turner is the agent. Reckon yuh'll find him on the job by now. The Virginia and Western station is right across the street. The stage for Hangtown, Californy, is purty nigh due to pull out. Figger yuh can get there before it leaves, if yuh hustle."

Harley thanked the counterman as he paid for his meal, went outside and headed south along C Street. He located Taylor Street, just south of Union, without difficulty, and soon found himself before a long, low building with "Great Divide Stage Coach Company" lettered on the windows. Across the street was a similar building boasting the legend, "Virginia and Western."

In front of the Great Divide building stood a huge coach to which were harnessed six powerful mules that showed a decided inclination to climb up the side of the buliding. They might have tried it had it not been for the hostlers gripping their bits and holding them down out of the air.

ON THE platform, charging up and down, waving his arms and cursing profusely, was the maddest man Wade Harley had ever seen. Harley hesitated a moment, then approached the squat, brawny individual who was giving such free rein to his temper. Acting on impulse, he asked a question:

"You happen to be Bill Turner, the Great Divide agent?"

The man addressed stopped swearing a moment, to glare at his interrogator.

"And what if I be? he demanded truculently.

There was a dancing light in Harley's green eyes as he smiled down at the wrathful little man. The agent swelled like a turkey cock, then unexpectedly grinned back.

"Feller, yuh seem to be the sort of jigger it ain't easy to get mad at," he said. "Uh-huh, I'm Turner. What yuh want. If it's transportation to Hangtown, I've a notion yuh're plumb out of luck. The Virginia and Western coach has done pulled out, double cuss and hang it! This blasted shebang ain't likely to go nowhere anyways soon."

"What's the trouble?" Harley asked.

"Trouble!" Turner bawled. "That's the word, all right. That's all I know is trouble. The only driver I got on tap went and got drunk last night and got his head busted wide open in one of them dives on Summit Street. I ain't got a man to take his place—and the stage due to leave twenty minutes ago!"

Harley glanced up at the motionless form

of the shotgun messenger perched on the driver's high seat.

"How about him?" he asked.

"Him!" Turner returned scornfully. "He couldn't drive a nail in a block of wood, much less six mules full of jackrabbit blood. All he's good for is to cut loose with that scattergun if necessary."

"Yuh couldn't take the stage out yore-shelf?" demanded Harley.

"I ain't that kind of a driver, either," Turner said shortly. "It's considerable of a chore, feller, this sort of equipage over the Sierras by way of old Andy Harley's Echo Canyon Trail. Gol dang it all to blazes! And that mail and express contract with the Virginia and Truckee Railroad we're anglin' for dependin' on us makin' a consistently better time record than the Virginia and Western! How in Tophet we goin' to make it?"

Harley studied him a moment.

"That contract's important?" he asked.

"This darn outfit is liable to go bust without it," Turner told him grimly. "She's about on her last legs as it is."

Harley considered, abruptly arrived at a decision. He took a packet of papers from his pocket and passed them to the surprised agent.

"My name's Wade Harley," he announced.

Turner started. He stared at the tall cowboy.

"So you're the old man's nephew, eh?" he exclaimed. "Well, if this don't take the tick off the sheep!"

He skimmed through the papers rapidly, folded them and returned them to Harley.

"So you're the new owner, suh," he remarked, his voice suddenly respectful.

"Reckon so," Harley admitted. "Yuh say yuh're plumb up against it for a driver."

"Up against it is right," Turner snorted.

Harley gestured to the silent messenger.

"Does that feller know the trail?" he asked.

"Reckon he ought to," Turner replied. "He's been over it often enough. Uh-huh, I figger Curt Adams knows the trail from here to Hangtown as well or even better'n any driver we got. Why?"

Harley hitched his cartridge belts a little higher.

"Because," he replied quietly, "I figger to take this outfit to Hangtown, if Adams there can give me the necessary directions on the way."

Turner stared at him, his jaw dropping.

"Yuh figger yuh can handle that team?"

"I do," Harley answered laconically. "All loaded and ready to go?"

"All loaded," Turner replied dazedly. "No pasengers this trip."

"Drop over to that livery stable on Mill Street, just off C, this evening and see to my hoss," Harley said, his foot on the step. "Be seein' yuh when I get back. How much of a start has that other outfit got on us this mornin'?"

"Nigh on to an hour," mumbled Turner, apparently still in a dazed condition over the unexpected turn of events. "They use another route till yuh get across the mountains and into Californy. The trails meet over there, beyond Lake Tahoe. Yuh can get a relief tonight at Tahoe."

HARLEY nodded, and swung onto the driver's seat. He gathered up the reins in his muscular hands.

"Let 'em go!" he called to the hostlers.

The men sprang back with wild whoops.

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

The mules lunged ahead, squealed, kicked, snapped at each other with gleaming teeth.

"Give 'em the whip, blast and cuss 'em!" bellowed Bill Turner. "Give 'em the whip!"

Grinning faintly, Harley plucked the great bull whip from its socket and sent the eighteen-foot lash hissing and crackling over the backs of mules, stirring their hair with the wind of its passing, but never touching their hides. The mules squealed louder than ever, and shot forward, their hoofs drumming the hard earth of the street.

Harley, the reins webbed about the fingers of his left hand, sent them careening around a bend and out onto the open trail. With every leap the rawhide lash was still hissing and whistling about their ears.

The great coach swayed wildly, rocking on its springs, its tires rasping and rumbling. It leveled off as the mules steadied to a smooth run and roared out of Virginia City in a cloud of dust.

Curt Adams, the taciturn shotgun guard, spoke for the first time.

"Son," he said, "yuh got the makin's of a tophand driver. Lots of fellers learn to handle the reins, but not many ever learn the whip, and if there's one thing a real top-hand driver has to know how to handle, it's the whip!"

CHAPTER IV

Land of Enchantment

THE coach was a great swinging and swaying stage, a veritable cradle on wheels. The inside was packed with mail and express matter. There was a full thousand pounds of it, the guard told Harley, nearly all destined for Hangtown, the roaring mining camp in California's Sacramento Valley.

"We usually have a few passengers," the guard told Harley, "but today the Virginia and Western got 'em all, seein' as it looked like we might not be able to pull out, at least for quite a spell. Reckon them passengers would of took the Virginia anyhow, if they knowed the rugged trail we're goin' over."

"But I understood the Great Divide had the shorter route," Said Harley. "How come?"

The guard nodded. "Yeah," he said, "we got the the shorter route all right, but the Virginia's is a heap easier on the nerves. Yore Uncle Andy laid out the trail from here to Hangtown, and did a bang-up job of it, but I reckon he didn't mind spinnin' along on the edge of a cloud. Yuh'll find out before we pull into Hangtown.

Harley "found out", all right. Leaving Virginia, they rumbled over plains and valleys, with the blue and white loom of the Sierras drawing nearer and nearer. On the desert the only vegetation was the sagebrush and its cousin the greasewood.

In regular rows grew the sage, with aisles of uniform width between the bushes, which, with their gnarled and twisted branches, had the appearance of venerable oak trees reduced to a height of two or three feet. The grayish green foliage tinted the desolate soil and was the prevailing color, a weary dusty color that ached the eyes with its monotony, while the pungent odor of the sage burned the nostrils and dried the throat.

But in the valleys and along the banks of the few streams were thickets of willow and alder. Higher up the slopes were white-barked pines, mountain hemlock and occasional red firs. Harley saw growths of white and yellow violets and the flame of Chinese-red paint brush. In sheltered spots clumps of white-limbed quaking aspen flaunted spots of brilliant yellow that were like sheets of newly minted gold against the deep blue of the sky.

"Down in Texas where I come from folks allus think of Nevada as a country of alkali flats and bare mountain rock," Wade Harley observed to the guard. "They shore got a wrong notion. This part of the country looks like a rainbow had busted to pieces and scattered all over it. Look at that thicket of wild rose up there, with the dogwood!"

"Wait till yuh see the stands of lodge-pole pine on the shore of Lake Tahoe, where the trail curves around it," Curt Adams boasted. "And there's sugar pine up there, too, and they're shore worth lookin' at. And there's wild peonies the color of a polished-up mahogany grand-piano, and monkey flowers that look like chunks of a sunset scattered around, and wild sunflowers that have got better lookin' gold in 'em than ever come out of the Comstock. And down on the desert a mite farther is samphire that is like a pine-

knot fire burnin' against the white alkali." Adams warmed to his subject of Nevada flora as the stage rumbled on.

"And still farther south," he said, "yuh'll find ocotillos twenty feet high and topped off with hundreds and hundreds of flowers that look just like lighted candles! And wait till yuh see a joshua tree forty feet high with the moonlight shinin' on it and its branches reachin' out to yuh like arms beggin' for somethin'. It blooms big creamy-white flowers, and once yuh see 'em yuh don't forget 'em. Uh-huh, feller, there's a heap more to Nevada than mountain rocks and snow and alkali flats."

Wade Harley cast him a side glance. This man, a gun guard, with poetry in his soul!

Steeper and steeper grew the slopes. The trail wound along the edge of a sheer cliff that dropped more than five hundred feet to the floor of a canyon. The inner edge was flanked by a continuation of the precipitous wall that rose for a thousand feet or more. Beyond the canyon could be seen the upward flinging slopes of the mountains that peeped over each other's shoulders, higher and still higher, the mighty mantle of their snows dazzling white in the sunshine, and blotched with black patches of rock that were too sheer to afford a clinging surface for the snow.

"Spinning along the edge of a cloud is right," Harley muttered as he tightened his grip on the reins and glanced down at the feathery crests of the trees so far, far below him.

AS THEY progressed, Adams grew increasingly vigilant.

"Never can tell what them Virginia and Western hellions is liable to pull on us," he said. "There's nothin' they ain't liable to do. And then, too, we pack mail and express that may be mighty valuable. There's gents in these hills what are on the lookout for anythin' worth takin', and they ain't particular how they take it."

"Oh, I reckon you could take care of 'em, Curt," Harley said confidently.

Curt Adams shook his head. "Mebbe—mebbe not," he said. "Anyway, you keep yore eyes skun along the trail, feller. If yuh see anything what don't look just right, pull up, and pull up fast. It ain't so bad goin' up like we are now, but after we start down the grade on the other side of Lake Tahoe and spinnin' around them hairpin turns in Echo Canyon, a tree dropped across the trail, or a big rock, is liable to send us bird-jumpin' down for a couple thousand feet with a hard landin' at the bottom."

Slower and slower grew the pace of the mules. They strained against the traces, their irons clashing on the rocks, the muscles on their haunches standing out like ropes. And ever, up and up wound the trail to the fleecy canopy of the clouds. And finally, like a vision of a land of enchantment, Lake Tahoe, more than six thousand three hundred feet above the sea, came into view.

Wade Harley's breath caught as the scene of entrancing beauty burst upon his eyes.

The lake was a vast oval, nearly a hundred miles around, and walled in by a rim of snowclad mountains that fanged their peaks of naked rock fully three thousand feet higher into the blue heavens. In the violet mirror of the lake's surface the mountains and the dense pine forests that clothed their slopes were reflected true to the minutest detail and tinted rainbow hues by the light of the low-lying sun.

Blue and gold and flaming scarlet was the sky above, and blue and gold and flaming scarlet was the water below. And when a little breeze stirred the glassy surface, the tones were merged and mellowed until it seemed a drunken artist-god must have hurled his paint pots in wild abandon through the crystal air to fall in a chromatic shower into the lake.

They skirted the lake for nearly fifteen miles, and just as the sun was vanishing in regal splendor behind the crags to the west, arrived at the Great Divide stage station.

It was a most lonely and desolate spot. The pine forests crowded to within a few hundred yards of the station buildings, and the space between was clothed by a dense growth of chaparral that walled in the little patch of cleared ground upon which the buildings stood. A narrow stretch of sandy beach belted the lake and to this a way had been cut through the growth. The trail wound through the chaparral both to and from the clearing.

A swarm of hostlers and other attendants poured out as the stage rolled up to the station. Amid a turmoil of shouting and profanity, the mules were unhitched and led to the big stable. Adams was soon deep in conversation with a quiet-looking elderly man who glanced from time to time at Harley, a pleased expression on his face.

Wade Harley, meanwhile, sensed an air of excitement pervading the hostlers and others. One loud-mouthed fellow was holding forth at length, and Harley caught what the man was saying.

"I chased the hellion through the brush for a mile and throwed a couple slugs at him," he was declaring. "Reckon I missed him both times, though. Anyhow he kept goin'. I tell yuh the rattlesnake was up to no good! Snoopin' around in the bushes that way and peekin' and peerin'. Gents, we're in for trouble sooner or later, and take my word on it. Them Virginia and Western skunks are out to nail our hides to the door if they can do it, and don't yuh forget it!"

"They may come by some nailin' themselves, if they don't keep their eyes skun," another man remarked. "Me, I ain't takin' no chances. The first one I run up against is goin' to eat lead."

There was a general nodding of agreement. Harley's dark brows drew together thoughtfully.

"Looks like I've tied onto somethin'," he mused. "Well, I come from a part of the world that don't believe in takin' dallies. Tie hard and fast and hang on! Interestin', anyhow."

Adams and the quiet-looking man were approaching.

"Mr. Harley, meet Jim Slayton," said the guard. "Jim is agent of the station. Yore uncle hired him and thought mighty well of him."

"Shore glad yuh showed up on the job, suh," said the superintendent as they shook hands. "We've been sort of up in the air since the Old Man passed on. Yuh know how it is— the boys are good workers and are to be depended on, but when things are uncertain, like they have been for the past couple months, and nobody knows just where he stands, it ain't easy to keep a outfit like this in line. Now that yuh're here to handle the reins, things will be different . . . Come in—supper's just ready and I've got a notion yuh could stand to eat a mite after the trip here from Virginia."

"Wouldn't go bad about now," Harley admitted. "By the way, what was that jigger talkin' about a minute ago—chasin' somebody through the brush?"

SLAYTON'S face darkened.

"I wish I knew," he replied. "Curly—that was him talkin'—swears there was a hard-lookin' hellion hangin' around the station. Said he had sneaked down in the bushes and was lookin' things over. Curly set out after him with his gun but couldn't run him down."

"Any idea who he could have been?" asked Harley.

Slayton shrugged. "Could be one of the Virginia and Western outfit up here in the hills." he said. "Aside from that, our stage packs some valuable stuff at times and if somebody over in Virginia got a line on it, they might be out to lift it. Never can tell. But we're ready for 'em. They'll find they've bit off considerable more than they can chew if they try somethin' when we're on the lookout. This is a hardrock bunch I got workin' for me here. It would be as much as Slade hisself would have wanted to do to tackle 'em."

Harley nodded. He was inclined to agree that taking on the bunch he ran his eyes over would have been a chore for even the J. A. Slade, the desperado the superintendent mentioned, whose infamy was legend throughout the West— the outlaw leader and Overland agent of Juleburg and Rocky Ridge, the "man without a soul", as he had been called, whose bloody career ended in a "tree top" in Virginia City.

After enjoying a really excellent meal, Harley and the agent had a talk.

"A funny situation developed after the comin' of the telegraph and the railroad," Slayton said. "Folks figgered when the telegraph line did away with the Pony Express that the railroad comin' clean across the continent would do for the stage-coach and the wagon freightin' business the same way. Chances are it will, in time, but not yet. The Overland Stage route and the Pony Express trail used to run through Hangtown and other places, but since the railroad they don't."

"But them places still need freight and express matter and such," said Harley, "and not all of it can be handled by the railroad.

"Yeah, there's still plenty of work for the stage lines," Slayton nodded. "Yore Uncle Andy surveyed and laid out the shortest route to Hangtown and them Valley minin' camps. The Great Divide has still got business to take care of, and will have plenty that'll pay, if we get that contract from the Virginia and Truckee Railroad to handle mail and express they carry to Virginia City."

"This is a mighty big section of country," Harley commented, "and it seems to me likely the railroads can't begin to handle, yet, all the business there is to be done. There's a sight of money to be made hereabouts, if you ask me."

"Shore," Slayton said grimly, "and Virginia and Western people know it as well as we do. They're out to skim off the cream, and they ain't at all particular as to the methods they use."

"Who runs the Virginia and Western?" Harley asked.

"It's a funny set-up," Slayton returned. "A jigger named Branch Bascomb is in charge of the outfit and has all the say. Yore Uncle Andy and old Jackson Lee, who started the Virginia and Western, were good friends and worked together." He glanced up at the young Texan inquiringly. "Reckon yuh know how yore uncle cashed in?"

"No," Harley replied, "I never heard any particulars concernin' his death. I was just told he met with an accident of some kind."

"It waren't much of an accident," Slayton returned more grimly. "Yore uncle and Jackson Lee were both ridin' the Great Divide stage when it was held up on the Hangtown Trail. There was a shootin'. Jackson Lee was drilled dead center and done in. Yore uncle was wounded bad. He lived for about a week after bein' plugged. When Lee's will was read, it was found that he left the control of the Virginia and Western and his other properties in the hands of Branch Bascomb, his superintendent, Bascomb to have complete control and all the say as to how the business was run till Lee's daughter come of age. She's about twenty, I understand."

"Lee seemed to have a heap of confidence in Bascomb," observed Harley.

"But I've got a notion he sort of misjudged that hellion," growled the agent. "Anyhow, Bascomb has been runnin' things with a high hand. He busted off relations with the Great Divide pronto. Took some business from us and, though I can't prove it, I'm mighty shore he's responsible for a heap of the trouble we been havin' of late."

"What kind of trouble?" asked Wade Harley.

"Plenty kinds," declared Slayton. "Our barns in Hangtown were burned one night and we lost several valuable mules. A couple drivers have been hurt in ruckuses, and so on. I've a notion when yuh get to the bottom of it, yuh'll find the driver who got busted up in Virginia City last night wasn't to blame for what happened."

"I see," Harley drawled thoughtfully. "Well, I reckon all we can do is make the best of things as they stand, and try to better 'em. I'll take the stage out in the mornin'. Sort of want to have a look at Hangtown. From what I hear of it it must be a right interestin' pueblo."

"Cussed interestin'!" Slayton returned drily. "The only trouble is it don't live up to its name enough."

"How's that?"

"There ain't been enough hangin's!"

CHAPTER V

"The Woods Are Afire!"

FOR a long time, Harley sat in his little room under the eaves of the Great Divide stage station, smoking, and gazing out across the surface of the lake. With the coming of darkness the brightening stars spangled the great mirror with jewels. The shadow of the mountains lay dark and mysterious on the glassy surface and nothing broke the solemn hush save the occasional weird cry of an owl or the lonely, hauntingly beautiful plaint of a hunting wolf somewhere in the black forests that clothed the precipitous slopes.

Gradually the station settled down to sleep and the silence grew even more intense. Harley began to grow drowsy. He rose, leaned out the window and gazed southward toward where the slope that was the pass through the mountains curved sharply downward.

Suddenly his eyes narrowed, his drowsiness dropped from him like a garment, and he stared with growing intensity at the star-flecked sky.

A reddish glow was paling the stars in the southwest and rapidly climbing toward the zenith.

Swiftly the ominous radiance mounted the long slant of the heavens, deepening, brightening, spangled abruptly by a rocket burst of glittering particles that gleamed for an

instant, vanished, and were replaced by others.

Harley whirled from the window. He crossed the room in a single catlike bound, flung open the door of his room. His voice rang and echoed through the quiet station:

"Turn out! Turn out, everybody! Tarnation's busted loose!"

A creaking of bedsprings, and the thud of feet on the floors, and a babble of words answered his warning shout. By the time he was downstairs, half-clad men were pouring from the rooms, bawling questions. Bewildered, sodden with sleep, they stared at the blood-red sky.

A hostler, reading the signs aright, let loose a bellow of fear.

"The woods are afire!" he whooped. "She's comin' this way! She'll sweep this station clean. To the water, boys! It's our only chance!"

He whirled and started to lead a panic-stricken rush to the lake. Harley's long arm shot out. He gripped the man in the lead by the shoulder and hurled him sprawling, to lie half-stunned on the ground. His voice rang out, clear, compelling, edged with authority.

"Hold it! The first hellion who tries to scoot I'll drill dead center. We're goin' to save this station! A man on the roof of each buildin'. Three more pack buckets of water from the lake and hoist 'em to the roofs. The rest of yuh get busy lightin' fires in the brush at the edge of the clearin'. Light 'em close, and all the way around. Move, before I start in on yuh!"

His words checked the wave of demoralization that had threatened to sweep the hands. They paused, muttering, uncertain.

"Move!" Harley thundered at them again. "We haven't got much time."

They obeyed him. Ladders were brought in a hurry and men went clambering to the roofs of the station, stable and other buildings. Others set off for the lake with jangling buckets.

"What's the sense of lightin' fires, boss?" a hostler wanted to know. "It'll be burnin' here quick enough as it is."

"The brush will burn slowly, and away from the station," Harley explained. "It's the way we fight fires down home in Texas. We plow a furrow and start a backfire that burns away from the buildin's or grass we want to protect. If we wait till the tree fire gets here, it'll sweep right through the brush, jump across and fire the buildin's. This way mebbe we can save them. Worth tryin', anyhow."

Soon a ring of growing fires surrounded the clearing. The brush burned slowly at first, for there was still sap in the branches, and the leaves had not yet achieved their autumn dryness. But as the heat increased, the flames crackled more fiercely.

Soon the clearing was surrounded by a seething ring of flame that leaped and sputtered, climbing the short trunks of the chaparral, racing along the twigs and bursting skyrocketlike in the crown of leaves. Smoke billowed up and eddied across the clearing in stifling clouds.

The men fighting the fire coughed and choked and swore, gasping for breath in the sweltering heat.

First sparks, then burning brands rained down on the buildings. A spark quickly became a smolder, a smolder a flame. The men on the roofs emptied their pails and bawled loudly for more water. It was hoisted to them and they dashed it on the flames.

More men clambered onto the roofs, more raced to and from the lake with buckets as the fire lighters turned to other chores. And all the while the mighty glow in the south climbed higher and higher, until the whole great arch of the heavens was an ocean of blood streaked with fiery brands and coiling streamers of smoke.

FASTER and faster rained the embers, and thicker and thicker were the showers of sparks. From the stable came the scream of terrified mules, from the rooftops the hoarse shouts of the fire fighters. At first the task was almost beyond them, but as the roofs became drenched with the torrents of water emptied over them, the sparks and brands found less upon which to feed.

"We're doin' it!" Harley told Slayton, wiping his grimy face with the sleeve of his shirt.

"If the heat don't get us," the superintendent replied. "We can't take much more of this, feller."

"Reckon we'll have to," Harley answered grimly.

He gestured toward the narrow lane that led to the lake. Flame was arching over it and the water bearers ran to and fro with their arms shielding their faces. He gazed anxiously at the rooftops. They were reeking with water and no fresh fires started. But

the heat was terrific and would soon dry the boards.

"Touch and go," he told Slayton. "The brush is mighty nigh burned down and it ought to be cooler soon."

"Better be," Slayton said grimly. "There's no gettin' to the lake for a spell."

"The stuff is greener over there and is burnin' slower," said Harley. "If it'll just burn down before the main fire hits the trees hereabouts, we can get more water, and we are liable to need it. Look at the roofs steam! They're dryin' mighty fast."

The water carriers were huddled together, crouching close to the ground to escape as much of the smoke and heat as possible. The men on the roofs came clambering down the ladders, gasping and panting, to fling themselves exhausted upon the ground.

From the southwest sounded a mighty roaring and crackling. In that direction the scene was awesome—a seething welter of flame topped by mighty bursts of dazzling radiance as the tinder-dry treetops exploded in corruscating showers. The heat was terrific, the smoke growing denser by the minute.

Up to the clearing and the burned area rushed the mighty tree fire. In seconds, it seemed, it circled the little oasis upon which the buildings stood. The men crouched helpless, scorched by the heat, stifled by the smoke, staring numbly at the scene of devastation.

But the very fierceness of the conflagration, which at first threatened to annihilate them, proved to be their salvation. So rabid were the flames, they devoured all the fuel at hand and were roaring up the mountainsides before the roofs dried sufficiently to catch fire from the sparks and embers raining upon them.

The passage to the lake, now carpeted with ash and glowing embers, became possible to negotiate again. The nearly exhausted fighters staggered down for more water. The roof men clambered painfully to their posts and drenched the roofs once more.

"That'll hold it!" Harley told them. "Come on down. Yuh've done yoreselves proud. There'll be extra money for every man here when payday rolls around, if I have to sell the mules to get the money!"

A croaking cheer greeted his words. Soon he was surrounded by a group of grinning men whose teeth flashed white in their blackened faces.

"Hurrah for the Old Man!" a big teamster bellowed hoarsely, and the cheers were repeated with a will.

Jim Slayton's wrinkled face glowed with pleasure.

"Yuh done won yore ratin', suh," he said in low tones. "No matter how young a feller is, these hellions call him the 'Old Man' when they accept him as the boss and worth workin' for, and they wouldn't call him that no matter how old he was if they didn't take to him and respect him."

Most of the weary and famished hands entered the station building in search of chuck and steaming coffee. But Wade Harley stood where he was outside for more than an hour, spellbound by the terrific spectacle the fire afforded.

It was a panorama of devastation. The whole mountainside north and east of the station was a blinding, tossing tempest of flame. The canyon mouths were red infernos, the ridges were charging regiments of fire that sent out glittering skirmish parties along adjacent spurs and followed them up with roaring bodies of glowing warriors like legions of demons pouring from a bottomless Gehenna.

Blood-red streams as of molten lava poured down the sags, broadened, pulsed, brightened to gleaming crimson streaked with awesome greens and blues, dulled to ash-flecked scarlet, flamed brightly anew, raced along the bottoms of the gorges and went writhing up the opposite slopes to leap over their crests and vanish. But only to reappear on the further slopes in waves of dazzling brilliance that climbed higher and higher in a kaleidoscope of color until they were lost in distant sparkles flinging to smoke-dimmed stars.

THE sky above was a scarlet immensity in which rolled the glowing smoke clouds wreathing into fantastic shapes and hues. The mountaintops were huge torches. The valleys between were incandescent craters flecked with unbelievable color. The cliffs of naked rock were stained ruby and gold and glittering emerald.

A waterfall that plunged a sheer two hundred feet was a cascade of jewels weltering into a basin of rubious foam. The stream that hurried from its base was deepest amber, changing to amethyst and wine and turquoise-studded purple. The air vibrated to a mighty symphony of sound that was fit

accompaniment to the chromatic miracle flowing on wings of light across the tortured earth.

The great mirror of the lake reflected every minutest detail with a bewildering richness, an intensifying of the riot of color and storm-whirl of action that dwarfed the stupendous spectacle of reality onward and upward in pomp and splendor to the tune of its roar and thunder of cosmic sound.

Harley stood entranced until the conflagration had traveled beyond his range of vision. Again the stars showed, dim and tiny in the smoke-veiled sky. Again the silence descended, stark and keen-edged, on the scene of desolation.

The manzanita thickets were swept away, the dead trees burned up, the pine forests well-scorched. But the rugged trunks still stood, for the most part, tall and erect, defiant of the fire demon, as they had stood defiant of the storms throughout the years.

Harley entered the station and sat with Jim Slayton over a sandwich and a cup of steaming coffee.

"Them Virginia and Western hellions are goin' to be mighty suprised when the stage rolls into Hangtown today as usual," the superintendent chuckled. "Man, will they be sold!"

"Yuh figger the fire was set, then?" Harley asked.

Slayton shrugged his shoulders. "Come along mighty pat after Curly saw that hellion snoopin' around in the brush," he replied.

"What about the Virginia and Western station?" Harley asked. "Have they got one in this section?"

"Uh-huh, but it's four miles to the west of here and sets in a big open space with rock cliffs all around it," Slayton answered. "Fire wouldn't bother it. Well, I'm goin' to turn in, and I reckon yuh'd better grab off a mite of shut-eye, if yuh're figgerin' on takin' the stage out today. Yuh only got about five hours yuh can count on."

"I want to get to the bottom of this," Harley said. "Can't you give me any more information than you have? This is very serious. If this fire was sure enough set—"

"That's what most any man would suspect right off on seein' it," Slayton interrupted. "Of course, I don't know the whole of it. I'm just tellin' yuh suspicions."

Harley scowled. He couldn't pin Slayton down. There was no use questioning him any further that night.

CHAPTER VI

The Race

ON THE following morning the stage rolled out of the station and passed over a trail thickly powdered with white ash and charred brands. The dust rose in gray clouds that set the mules to coughing and wheezing. The blistered trunks of the pines rose starkly amid the blackened remains of the thickets, and the needles that only the day before had carpeted the earth with rich brown.

"She'll come back better'n ever next year, though," Adams, the guard, declared, nodding his head sagely. "Takes more'n a brush fire to hold this country down. Fact is, it just makes the earth richer. Hard on the pore critters that got caught in it, though. That fire moved mighty fast last night. Reckon a heap of 'em didn't manage to get in the clear, not even jack-rabbits, fast as they can move."

"Whereabouts are we now, Curt?" Harley asked the guard.

"This is the old Overland route we're travelin' now," Adams told him. "Two miles further on we turn into Echo Canyon, where yore uncle ran the line for the Great Divide's trail. She's some trail, feller, some trail!"

Harley heartily agreed that it was "some trail", when, a little later, they left the Overland and entered a gloomy gorge whose mighty walls towered for more than thousand feet into the blue of the sky.

The trail itself followed a narrow bench that shelved out from the wall midway between the gorge floor and the crests of the cliffs. It showed evidence of plenty of engineering skill having been employed in its construction. In several places, where the bench narrowed greatly, it had been cut in zigzags from the face of the cliff. Once it tunneled through a bulging cliff for a distance of nearly thirty yards. A gap in the bench had been bridged with heavy timbers.

Harley, with his not inconsiderable knowledge of the principles of engineering, admired and appreciated the ingenuity of construction. The gulf was far too deep to admit of raising piers from the bottom of the gorge, and too wide to be accommodated by

a single span. To support the middle span, great beams had been let into the face of the cliff above, and the span had been suspended from these by means of iron rods bolted to the beams above and the wooden girders of the span below.

"A long way to the bottom down there," Adams remarked, spitting reflectively over the bridge railing. "Reckon up here yuh wouldn't even hear a feller hit when he landed."

"Reckon yuh'd have to take him up with a blotter," Harley agreed, gazing down into the near a thousand feet of nothingness as they rolled across the booming floor boards. He had thought that leap he and Rojo had taken down in Texas was something, but it was nothing compared to this.

He drove on, and west of the bridge the trail curved in a long sweep around a bulwark of frowning cliffs. Then it abruptly dropped downward with dizzy steepness and appallingly sharp bends.

Harley drew deep breaths as the lumbering coach took the turns, with the rock wall jutting outward in an overhang on one side and the awful drop into nothingness on the other. For nearly three miles the trail was so narrow that the stage almost brushed the cliff wall and the outer wheels seemed to balance on the lip of the precipice falling toward the far-off canyon floor below.

"No room for passin' here," Adams commented. "They figger purty close on the schedule and the eastbound never takes this slope until the westbound shows up at the bottom. It shore ain't no place for a head-on meet."

A little more than halfway down the sag, the left wall of the cliff was cut by a cleft fifty yards or so wide that bored southward through the hills.

"Where does that hole lead to?" Harley asked.

"Nowheres in particular," Adams replied. "Rambles on through the mountains and ends up in a box, or so I heard yore uncle say once. Turns more to the west after yuh get around that shoulder of rock that shuts off the view."

Harley studied the narrow track as they swept past.

"Glad there isn't a trail runnin' out of there to join this track," he remarked. "If a team should come larrupin' out of there as we were passin' and slam into us, we'd be mighty liable to go over the edge."

"Yuh're right there," Adams agreed, "but it ain't never used so far as I ever heard tell of. No place to go over there." He peered ahead. "Well, we're mighty nigh to the bottom, then up, and on to Californy!"

UP AND up climbed the canyon pass. With the mountain peaks walling it in on either side, it was more suggestive of a valley than what it really was—a suspension bridge in the clouds. The mules panted and labored, gaining slow foot by slow foot, toiling yard by yard.

Harley, glancing ahead, could see what looked to be the edge of the world, with illimitable depths beyond. It was the crest of the divide, beyond which lay the downward path. Upward and still upward! Finally they had climbed the Sierras to the clouds, and looked down on summer-clad California with its banks of flowers, its flashing streams, its gold and romance, adventure and legend.

The trail now pitched sharply downward and the mules that had been plodding so slowly a short time before, tossed their heads and really let themselves go. Wade Harley, the reins webbed about the fingers of his left hand, the ready whip in his right, sensed a buoyant exhilaration, a rising intoxication of spirit as the great coach fairly flew down the mountain trail.

"Another mile and we hit the old Overland!" Adams shouted above the rumble of the wheels, the beat of the mules' irons and the jingling of the harness. "Then a mile more and the Virginia and Western track cuts in. Wonder if they are ahead of us this mornin'? If we sight 'em, it'll be a race from here to Hangtown."

Soon the trail opened onto another and broader one. It was deeply rutted and showed other evidence of extensive use.

"She was a busy one before the days of the railroad," Adams remarked. "I've seen strings of wagons a mile long headed down this mountain."

The Overland, while broader than the Great Divide Trail, was no less steep and winding. Harley had his hands full with the mules and had little time to devote to the gorgeous panorama spread before his eyes. He stole glances over the far landscape when he was able.

Suddenly he was brought back to his immediate surroundings by the excited voice of the guard.

"Here comes the Virginia and Western

likkerty split!" exclaimed Adams. "They're in front of us!"

Glancing ahead, Harley saw a huge coach rolling out of a side track onto the Overland. The lumbering vehicle, drawn by six splendid mules, was nearly a quarter of a mile farther down the mountain. A guard sat beside the driver who, even at that distance, gave an impression of youth and slenderness. But the handling of the team obviated any assumption of inexperience or lack of ability.

"Yuh got yore work cut out for yuh, boss!" whooped Adams, rocking on his seat with excitement.

Harley spoke to the mules, his voice ringing out clear and encouraging. The intelligent animals responded, snorting and blowing, their eyes rolling, their ears flattened back. The great coach fairly flew over the uneven track, rocking and reeling, its springs creaking, its great iron tires rolling a deep thunder from the stones and hard-packed earth.

Slowly, slowly, the distance between the two vehicles closed. The trail became even more steep and rugged, with sharp curves which the leading driver negotiated with consummate skill. And in pursuit, drawing nearer, roared the Great Divide stage.

The pace began to tell on the Virginia mules. The Great Divide coach gained more swiftly. Harley plucked the whip from its socket and sent the multiple lashes whining and hissing over the backs of his mules. The animals squealed with anger, and redoubled their efforts.

"That feller's holdin' too close to the middle of the road!" boomed Adams. "Yuh're goin' to have trouble passin' him."

The lead mules now were straining their noses toward the rear of the Virginia coach. They swerved obediently to Harley's steady pull on the reins, squealed again as the whiplash sang about their ears. They lunged forward, flickered past the body of the coach.

"Pull over, you!" Harley thundered. "Pull over and let us pass!"

He caught a glimpse of the white blur of the driver's face turned toward him for an instant. It seemed all great frightened eyes. The muscles of Wade Harley's arms and shoulders swelled his shirt sleeves to the bursting point as he put forth his strength to hold his flying team steady. Then they were whipping past the Virginia coach, with the open trail gray and empty ahead.

Suddenly the leading coach swerved, ever so little, but enough to bring disaster. The ponderous tire of the rear in-wheel of the Great Divide stage struck squarely and with prodigious force on the projecting hub of the Virginia's front wheel. There was a tremendous crash, a rending of wood and metal.

THE Great Divide mules floundered, kept their feet by a miracle of agility. Their stage flashed past the rival coach as the freed front axle of the Virgina smashed to the ground. The cumbersome vehicle rocked wildly, the front mules went down in a welter of kicking and squealing and tangled harness!

Harley saw the driver flung from the lofty seat to strike on the off wheel mule's back and roll to the ground beside the trail. The guard was also hurled from his perch. His body grazed the rear of the Great Divide coach before he hit the trail to lie without sound or motion. From inside the wrecked coach came the screams of frightened passengers.

Wade Harley put forth every ounce of his great strength, but the coach he drove was a hundred yards down the trail from the tangled wreck before he got his frenzied mules under control. He dragged them to a blowing halt.

"Hold them!" he flung at Adams.

He was off the seat in one lithe leap that sent him to the ground, rocking back on his heels to preserve his balance. He caught his stride and ran swiftly back up the trail.

The slight form of the fallen driver lay face downward in the grass beside the road. Harley's eyes darkened with concern as he drew near.

"Not big as a minute," he muttered. "Must be just a boy. Hope he didn't bust his neck. Reckon the mule's back broke his fall, though."

Kneeling, he picked up the slim form, cradling it in his arms. As he did, the broad-brimmed "J.B." fell off and Wade Harley stared in incredulous amazement. Across his arm had cascaded a wealth of curly red-golden hair. The lashes of the closed eyes were long and black and thick and they lay against the creamily tanned cheeks like a shadow of black lace.

A touch of vivid color was stealing back into the soft, sweetly formed lips above a round, white little chin and beneath a straight little nose, the bridge of which was delicately powdered with a few freckles. The

slender form in his arms was softly rounded, with curves where curves were in order.

"For the love of Pete!" Harley gasped. "A girl!"

Even as Wade Harley stared in unbelief, the black lashes fluttered, raised, and two great, deeply blue, wondering eyes gazed into his.

"Who—who—how—" the girl in his arms gasped, struggling to get free.

"Take it easy, ma'am," Harley cautioned. "Yuh got a nasty fall and may be hurt."

As he lowered her gently to the ground, the girl passed a hand across a red spot on her white forehead.

"I hit my head," she replied. "It doesn't hurt much, though."

"Reckon the mule's back broke yore fall," Harley agreed, "but take it easy."

"Who are you? Where did you come from?" she asked.

"Texas," Harley replied, answering the last question first. "I'm the driver of the Great Divide stage," he added.

The girl stared at him. Then suddenly her blue eyes blazed with anger, making her, Harley thought, even more attractive. She struggled to a sitting position.

"Is there anything you people won't do to make us trouble?" she demanded. "I believe you deliberately wrecked my coach, so you could beat us to Hangtown!"

Despite a still slightly dazed feeling, Harley repressed a grin with difficulty.

"If yuh'd held yore mules straight, it wouldn't have happened," he replied. "And didn't yuh hear me yell at yuh to pull over so I could pass?"

The girl glared, her eyes still glowing.

"I didn't want to pull over," she replied. "You had no business trying to pass me."

She sprang to her feet with a lithe grace and a sureness of movement that relieved Harley's anxiety as to possible injury. He stared at her, his brows drawing together with perplexity.

"First time I ever saw a girl handlin' a six-mule team," he observed. "Who are yuh, ma'am?"

"I'm Alison Lee," she replied. "What of it, and what if I can handle a team? I don't see anything so unusual in that."

"Reckon yuh don't, ma'am," Harley admitted, "but just the same it is sorta of unusual."

The girl suddenly glanced toward the wrecked coach.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in a frightened voice. "What happened to Billy Whetsall?"

"Billy Whetsall?"

"The guard," she answered. "Was he hurt?"

" 'Fraid so," Harley replied. "Let's go see."

CHAPTER VII

Man From Rocky Ridge

PASSENGERS had alighted from the stalled coach and were grouped around the prostrate form of the guard. Harley pushed his way through and knelt beside an unconscious man. The eyes of the young Texan darkened with concern as he noted Whetsall's bloodless face and the stertorous gasps of his breathing. He ran exploring fingertips through the guard's hair and encountered a large lump.

"Don't seem to be any fracture, but I'm scared he's got a bad concussion," he said. "We'll get him to a doctor as quick as we can."

He picked up the guard's bulky form, apparently without effort, and carried him to the Great Divide coach. There he made the injured man as comfortable as possible on spread-out sacks of mail. Then he walked back to the Virginia passengers.

"All right, gents," he said. "Reckon yuh're transferin' here. We'll get yuh to Hangtown on schedule."

The passengers nodded, and headed for the coach. Harley quickly unhitched the mules of the Virginia coach and turned them loose to graze. The he turned to the girl, who was standing a little to one side, eyeing him with frank hostility.

"All right, ma'am, let's get goin'," he said.

The little white chin went up.

"I'm not going anywhere," she replied. "I'm staying here with my coach. I hate to have to ask it of you, but will you please notify our station in Hangtown of what happened, so they can send a crew here to repair the coach and bring it in."

"I'll do that, and gladly," Harley replied, "but you're not stayin' here on a lonely trail to wait for 'em. It'll be dark long before they

get here. Into the coach, ma'am. Yuh're holdin' us up."

"I tell you I'm not getting into your coach," Alison Lee replied firmly. "I'm not walking a step from where I am."

"All right," Harley replied.

He began moving toward her. She retreated a step as he drew near.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Carry yuh to the coach and put yuh in," Harley returned imperturbably.

"You—you wouldn't dare!" she gasped, her eyes wide.

"If yuh won't walk, how else yuh goin' to get there?" Harley asked.

"You—you—" she panted.

He was almost within arm's reach when suddenly she whirled and, with a sound that was neither a sob nor a laugh, but something of each, ran fleetly to the Great Divide coach and vanished through the door. Harley's lips twitched slightly as he followed at a leisurely pace.

Two of the Virginia passengers were massive, elderly men with firm mouths and keen eyes that had the suspicion of a twinkle in their depths. As Harley drew near, one of them stepped forward and held out a huge paw.

"Son," he said, "yuh seem to be sort of high-grade at handling' mules—and women. My name's Hearst—George Hearst. This is Mr. William M. Stewart with me. If yuh should happen over to Sacramento some time, drop in and see us. Yuh won't have trouble findin' us. Don't forget. We'll be glad to see yuh."

"Thank yuh, suh," Harley replied as he shook hands with each man in turn. "Be glad to, if I happen to get over that way."

"Don't forget," George Hearst repeated. With friendly nods, he and his tall companion climbed into the coach and closed the door.

Harley mounted to the driver's seat and got the mules under way. Adams glanced at him curiously.

"Them two old jiggers yuh were talkin' to seemed to take to yuh, boss", he observed in low tones. "They're fellers wuth knowin'. George Hearst owns most of the Gould and Curry mine, biggest on the Comstock lode. He's worth millions. Stewart is his lawyer, and lawyer for lots of other minin' interests and railroads, and such. They're big men, and goin' to get bigger, or I'm a heap mistook. I figger both of 'em will end up governors or congressmen, or somethin' big like that."

Judging from the appearance and bearing of the two men, Harley was inclined to believe that Adams' prophecy might not be so far-fetched.

As they rolled down the mountain slopes, the air grew balmier and balmier and the landscape glowed with an ever more luminous beauty. Doves cooed in the branches, brightly plumaged birds darted among the trees. Flowers became more and more frequent and about them hovered clouds of jeweled honeysuckers.

Peaks crowned with twisted snow wreaths towered in grandeur. In the great valley below, streams coiled like silver snakes, flashing in the sunlight. And over all was the thrilling breath of Nature's glad, free life.

"The Garden of Eden may have been in the Valley of the Jordan in the first place," Harley observed to Adams, "but I've a notion they must have later moved it to California."

THE guard nodded grave agreement.

"She looks it," he admitted, "but they brought the snakes along, too, and don't yuh forget it. And in this here garden folks shore earn their bread by the sweat of their brows. Not that they don't manage to corral plenty of bread," he added whimsically. "Look over there to the left. We're already comin' to claims and placer mines. Them gents swingin' picks shore ain't diggin' for fishin' worms."

As they left the growths of the Arctic-Alpine, the Hudsonian and the Canadian zones behind, the flora became more luxuriant. Gone was the characteristic Sierran forest, with its "big trees", the four-thousand-year-old sequoias, and their accompanying stands of fir. Left behind, too, were the forests of yellow and sugar pine, incense cedar, golden and black oak, California laurel, and broadleaved maple, with the stands of tiger and leopard lilies, gilias, mariposa tulips and the omnipresent lupines.

They had passed through the great chaparral belt to enter the garden of the Sacramento Valley, fragrant with mint, godetia, viola and California poppy. The incense of the blooms was intoxicating. The plains and lower slopes were blanketed with blossoms.

Nor was animal life wanting. In the course of the downward trip, Harley caught a glimpse of a California grizzly, doomed to early extinction. He saw a black-tailed deer

whisk away through the growth with the grace of a dancing sunbeam. And once he saw a beautiful California ring-tailed cat, a relative of the raccoon, perched on a branch and regarding him with a yellow and dubious eye.

But Harley's mind was not thoroughly occupied by the beauties of this garden spot of the world. From time to time his thoughts strayed from natural scenery to the red-haired, blue-eyed girl in the coach beneath his lofty perch.

"And that's old Jackson Lee's daughter," he mused. "Looks like she's takin' an active hand in the business of runnin' the company. Don't appear to hold an overly good opinion of the Great Divide. Well, she had a close call in that smashup. If she'd gone under the mule's irons it would have been her finish."

He shivered a little at the thought, despite the heat of the afternoon sun.

"Yuh should have told me there was a girl drivin' that shebang, and I'd have been a mite more careful about passin'," he remarked suddenly to Adams.

The guard gave a sideward glance, and there was a twinkle of amusement in his deep-set eyes.

"Didn't recognize her myself, in them baggy overalls, and with that floppy hat pulled down over her eyes," he explained. "She's changed considerable, too, since I saw her last. That was just before she went away to school, two years ago. She was a leggy little carroty-haired, freckle-faced gal when she was ridin' around with her dad, old Jackson Lee, in them days. Uh-huh, she's changed considerable."

"Imagine she has," Harley agreed emphatically.

Adams grinned. "Not surprisin' to see her drivin' the stage, though," the garrulous guard continued. "She always was a regular tomboy—ridin' a half-tame hoss and packin' a gun. Her mother died when she was born, and old Jackson brung her up hisself. Reckon he didn't do a bad job of it, though, judging from present appearances. Looks like she inherited the old man's temper, though, from the way she lit into you. She don't seem to think over well of yuh, boss. I figger Branch Bascomb has filled her head with outlandish notions about us fellers. He's that sort."

"She's the real owner, though, isn't she?" Harley asked.

"Uh-huh, but till she turns twenty-one, she ain't got nothin' to say about how the out-fit is run. Bascomb was left plumb in control. I reckon she takes considerable handlin', even for Branch Bascomb, but he's a cold proposition and don't stand for over much foolishness from nobody. For the life of me I can't figger how old Jackson Lee took such a shine to him. I heard tell once, though, that Bascomb saved the old man's life one time, and did it at considerable risk to hisself. That sounds like Bascomb, all right. I reckon there waren't anything ever walked, crawled or flied that he's scared of."

"Bascomb an old man?" Harley asked suddenly.

"About thirty, mebbe a year or two more," Adams returned. "A big up-standin' fine-lookin' feller with yaller hair and eyes the color of lake Tahoe in the winter time. Cold like ice. He's nigh as tall as you, and even broader across the shoulders, I'd say. Almighty handy with a gun or a knife, and

[*Turn page*]

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign
Of Tired Kidneys

If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

plumb ready to use either one. I've heard he used to be Overland agent over at Rocky Ridge in Colorado."

HARLEY glanced around with interest. "Rocky Ridge!" he repeated. "Why that's the place—"

Adams nodded. "Yeah, that's the place where Jim Slade made such a name for hisself. All that section is a regular nest of outlaws and hard characters. But I heard Bascomb handled 'em all right. It's been said that when Bascomb had trouble makin' a hostler or some other of the station scum over there understand somethin' he wanted done, he'd impress it on the jigger by shootin' him between the eyes. They said the jigger usually succeeded in gettin' it through his head!"

Harley gave the guard a quick glance.

"Looks like we're sort of up against somethin'," he commented.

"We are," Adams agreed grimly. He was silent for a moment or two, then said, "Well, there's the American River and just the other side a piece is Hangtown. Yuh can see the smoke from here."

Not long afterward they were rumbling along Main Street of the mining town that had once been a serious contender with San Francisco and Sacramento in wealth and population. A few minutes later they turned from Main Street, which twisted along the winding banks of rock-lined Hangtown Creek, into Coloma Street.

"I want to stop at the Virginia and Western's station first," Harley told Adams. "We'll get rid of the passengers and their truck there, and arrange for the hurt guard to be taken care of."

"Just a coupla streets down," replied Adams.

A few minutes more and they pulled up before the rambling stage station. Harley dropped to the ground and helped the passengers out with their baggage. Last came George Hearst and William Stewart, carrying the unconscious guard between them. Alison Lee hovered over him, her blue eyes anxious.

As they descended, a tall, exceedingly handsome golden-haired man came hurrying from the station, a look of surprise on his finely featured face. His glance rested on Wade Harley.

"What the blazes?" he exclaimed. "Where's our coach?"

"Up the trail a piece," Harley replied. "Reckon it'll stay there till yuh send somebody to put it back in shape and bring it in."

The golden-haired man stared. "How come?" he asked at length.

"One of our rear tires hit a front wheel while we were passin' and took it apart," Harley answered laconically.

A sinister expression filmed the other man's blue eyes, and when he spoke again, his voice was menacing.

"Reckon yuh'd better do some explainin', feller," he said.

"Guess my mules sort of got away from me a mite and we swerved," Harley replied.

The tall man's eyes flashed. His lips set in a hard line, then opened. But before any sound could come forth, Alison Lee interrupted.

"You needn't lie to protect me!" she blazed at Harley. "It was my fault, Branch," she told the golden-haired man. "I let the lines slack on my mules, and they swerved. That's all there is to it."

CHAPTER VIII

In Days To Come

AT THIS frank confession from Alison Lee, both Wade Harley and Branch Bascomb were for the moment bereft of speech. Harley's expression was one of astonishment, but Bascomb flushed, and the ominous glitter in his blue eyes intensified.

"That's all very well," he said, "but if this feller hadn't been tryin' to shove past yuh, Alison, it wouldn't have happened. Why couldn't yuh hold to yore own place on the trail?" he demanded of Harley.

"That's what I was aimin' to do," Harley replied laconically.

"What yuh mean?"

"Well, from the rate yore coach was travelin', I figgered our place was out in front," Harley drawled.

Old George Hearst chuckled. The tall, silent William Stewart looked amused. But the flush on Branch Bascomb's face deepened. His hand suddenly dropped toward

the butt of the heavy Colt slung low on his right hip.

Wade Harley stood perfectly still, his slim hands hanging loosely by his sides, his eyes never leaving Bascomb's face.

It was George Hearst's rumbling voice that snapped the tension.

"I reckon there's not much sense in gettin' on the prod over what was a plumb accident," he remarked.

The words were spoken quietly, but with an authority that expected, and doubtless usually got obedience. The effect on Bascomb was marked. His hand dropped away from his gun butt. He nodded his head.

"Guess yuh're right, Mr. Hearst," he agreed. "I'm purty much out of sorts today. Fact is, I was worried about Miss Lee when the stage didn't show on time. She had no business bringin' the coach in. If I had been been at the Tahoe station this mornin' I wouldn't have let her do it. Higgins should have brought the coach in, as he was supposed to."

Harley saw Alison Lee's chin tilt stubbornly. She evidently did not particularly relish Bascomb's assumption of authority over her movements.

"Somebody had to take it out," she replied, "and it happened there wasn't another capable driver at the station right at the moment."

Bascomb gave her a surprised glance.

"What was the matter with Higgins?" he demanded.

"Somebody shot him through the arm yesterday evening," the girl replied. She cast a significant glance at Harley as she spoke.

Bascomb uttered a startled exclamation.

"How'd it happen?" he demanded.

"Nobody knows for sure, not even Higgins," the girl answered meaningly, not taking her eyes from Wade Harley. "He brought the westbound stage in early yesterday afternoon and decided to take a walk in the woods. Somebody shot at him and hit him in the arm."

"Another drygulchin', eh?" growled Bascomb.

Harley said nothing, but his black brows drew together and his eyes were thoughtful. He did not see fit to mention—now—that a Great Divide driver also had met with an "accident" last night.

Bascomb turned to Harley. "Yuh're new on the job, ain't yuh?" he asked. "Well, I reckon it ain't fair to blame yuh for things that happened before yuh started to work, but yuh've got yoreself mixed up with a bad outfit." His eyes grew speculative as he added, "By the way, I haven't seen yuh before, have I? Yuh shore remind me of somebody. What's yore name?"

Harley supplied it. Bascomb started visibly.

"So yuh're the nephew old Andy used to talk about!" he exclaimed. "Well, I'll be—"

He did not finish the sentence. Alison Lee's breath caught, and she stared at the tall young Texan as if seeing him for the first time. As their glances met, she colored, then turned abruptly and entered the station. Old George Hearst, wise in the ways of men and women, chuckled under his whiskers, and there was an amused look in his deep set eyes.

Branch Bascomb did not look at all amused as he also abruptly entered the station.

Harley shrugged, climbed back upon the driver's high seat and cracked the whip over the backs of the mules. He drove the stage back to Main Street and pulled up before the Great Divide Station, near the corner of Main and Cedar Ravine. Here he introduced himself to the agent, George Westbrook.

The agent greeted him with enthusiasm, and was undoubtedly greatly pleased at his arrival. His attitude corresponded to that of Jim Slayton and the Virginia agent.

"Now we'll be able to get somewheres," Westbrook declared. "I've a notion, suh, yuh'll favor the extension of the line to Sacramento City, like yore uncle planned, and mebbe the wagon freight trains he used to talk about he was goin' to put into operation."

"We'll discuss that later," Harley suggested. "Sounds plumb interestin', at any rate."

THE agent crowed exultantly over Adams' account of what happened on the Hangtown Trail.

"This helps give us a edge on that Virginia crowd," he declared, rubbing his hands together complacently as the mail and express was unloaded. "Their stuff will be way late gettin' in, and the railroad folks are shore keepin' an eye on things. Gettin' the contract from them depends on makin' a consistently better record of delivery than the Virginia and Western can make. Yuh couldn't have done better, suh, if yuh'd planned to take that wheel off for 'em."

"A mite too risky to figger out in advance," Harley said, and smiled. "If our tire had jumped the wheel when it hit their hub, it would have more likely been us gettin' in late. We got the best of it on that deal."

"I figger we got some more such luck comin' to us," the agent replied. "They been handin' themselves too much good fortune, at our expense, of late. Don't tell me our driver over at Virginia City got his head busted in a real personal ruckus. Our drivers and other hands have been havin' too cussed many such accidents of late."

"Uh-huh," said Harley thoughtfully. "And there was the fire."

"There shore was," said Westbrook. "And don't let anybody tell yuh that fire last night caught by itself. From what Adams says, suh, yuh must of done a fine chore up there. If the station and the mules and the coaches had been burnt up, it would have hit us mighty heavy—well nigh crippled us. Uh-huh, a fine chore. I shore got the notion things are goin' to pick up for the Great Divide, sort of like they was when yore uncle was up and kickin'. Only the Old Man didn't have to put up with trouble like we have had to since he passed on. Him and old Jackson Lee got along together and give each other a chance. I figger they aimed, sooner or later, to tie up in a pardnership. But that cussed Branch Bascomb!"

He ended the observation in a rumble of profanity.

"Where's the nearest barber shop?" Harley asked. "After I find one and get these whiskers shaved off I'll look up a place to put on the nosebag. This California air shore gives a feller a swell appetite."

"With them whiskers, yuh're the spittin' image of Old Andy," Westbrook remarked, "only his was gray. Yuh're just about a height and size, too. Andy was six foot four, if I recollect right."

Following the agent's directions, Harley located the barbershop without trouble. Half an hour later he gazed with satisfaction at his reflected image. His cheeks were a shade lighter than they had been a couple of months before, but there was a leanness and hardness to his face that had been lacking during the days of his association with Matthew Dickson. His long trip up from Texas had seasoned him well.

"Reckon the best thing that ever happened to me was gettin' out of Webb," he told himself, as he got into his coat. "I was puttin' away a deal more red-eye than I had any business to. Well, that's over, and I'm glad of it."

His brows drew together as he thought of Dickson. The gambler's livid face and blood-frothed lips as he went down were not pleasant to remember.

"Wonder if I did for him?" he mused. "Hope not. The old jigger who said 'A dead man don't make a soft pillow at night' knew what he was talkin' about. Have to get in touch with John Arbuckle and find out just what did happen."

Leaving the barbership, he looked up a restaurant and enjoyed a good meal, washed down with numerous cups of coffee. Then he smoked a cigarette leisurely, and sauntered out onto Main Street.

The lovely blue dusk was shifting down from the hilltops, the western sky was aflame with scarlet and gold and tremulous rose. A soft hush swathed mountain and prairie. All Nature seemed to be holding its breath in quiet waiting for the dark mantle of night and rest.

Not so Hangtown. The mining town was just beginning really to awaken. The miners had knocked off for the day and were trooping into town for relaxation and diversion. The crooked street was crowded, the air hummed with a babble of talk.

The windows had changed from staring purplish eyes to squares and rectangles of gold. The whine of fiddles, and strumming of guitars and the pert notes of banjos sounded from saloons and dancehalls. There was the clink of bottle necks against glass rims, the cheerful ring of gold pieces and the solid thumps of pokes of dust on the "mahogany".

The voices of the dealers at the tables and wheels rose in a monotonous monotone:

"Place yore bets, gents, place yore bets! A thousand on the red! Payin' off on the black! Double O wins again! Step up, gents! Set down poor and rise up rich! Place yore bets!"

HARLEY chuckled under his breath.

"Sounds like old times," he told himself, "only I figger this pueblo is a mite wilder and woollier when it gets goin' than anything I've run up against before. An interestin' part of the country all right. Reckon those gents in the wool shirts and muddy boots will all be drunk and busted long before mornin' if they have any luck at

all. Yes, suh, she's beginnin' to howl!"

Outside the restaurant he met Curt Adams, the Great Divide shotgun guard.

"Want to walk around a mite and look the town over?" Adams invited.

"Reckon we could do worse," Harley agreed.

They sauntered along the street together, Harley towering over most of the crowd, Adams pointing out places of interest—the Methodist Church, the old Hangtown bell, rung to summon the vigilantes or sound fire alarms.

"There's St. Patrick's Church over there," Adams remarked. "There's a silver bell in the steeple. It was given the church by the miners. There used to be a old frame buildin' there that was the first church, built way back in Fifty-two.

They paused at the corner of Main and Coloma Streets and gazed at a great oak tree.

"That's the hang tree," Adams explained. "That's where they hung three hellions that belonged to the owlhoot outfit knowed as the Owls. They'd held up a French feller named Cailloux in his cabin, with a knife, and stole fifty ounces of gold off him. The vigilantes caught 'em the next mornin' and strung 'em up to that tree. Been knowed as the hang tree ever since, and used for more hangin's.

"Irish Dick Crone, Bill Brown, and a lot of other rattlesnakes did a dance on nothin' beneath that big branch what stretches over this way. Fact is, that's how the town come to get the name it's most known by. It was first called Ravine City, but most everybody calls it Hangtown.

"Come on along this side street, there's a feller down here I want yuh to meet. He's a funny sort of jigger with queer notions, but a good Injun just the same."

As they walked along, Harley thought over what Adams had told him.

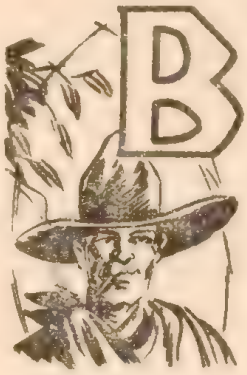
"All the violence is not buried in the past," he said. "There's men today that could make those three Owls look like amateurs. What's your opinion, pardner?"

"Reckon you're right," Adams admitted. "I ain't one who thinks that everything bad happened long ago. There's bad today that is just as bad as long ago. And there's plenty of good, although you might have to look hard to find it."

"Those are my sentiments," Harley admitted. "And we ought to go along with the good."

CHAPTER IX

A Bibulous Gold Digger



BEFORE an open door, Harley and Adams paused. Through it came the ruddy glow of a forge and a cheerful sound of hammer on anvil.

"Hello, John!" greeted Adams, as they entered the shop. "Harley, I want yuh to know John Studebaker. Still gettin' rich makin' wheelbarrows for the miners, John?"

"So, so, Curt, so, so," replied Studebaker, as he laid down his hammer and shook hands with a firm grip. He was a jovial-looking man with keen eyes that were nevertheless slightly dreamy. "I'm keepin' busy, and layin' aside some money," he added.

"Still figgerin' on buildin' wagons some day?"

"That's right, Curt. Folks need better wagons than what they have now-days. I hope to see the time when Studebaker wagons are known all over the country."

"Hope yuh will, John," Adams agreed heartily. "And still thinkin' on that notion of wagons that'll run without hosses to pull 'em?"

"Uh-huh, I am," John Studebaker replied, his eyes becoming still more dreamy of expression. "You mark my words, Curt, the day will come, and if nothin' sudden happens to us, we'll all three live to see the time when wagons without hosses will be runnin' over these trails, and runnin' a sight faster than a hoss can pull 'em."

Wade Harley regarded the prophetic smith with grave interest, but Adams slapped his thigh and laughed uproariously.

"With engines in 'em to run 'em, like the steam engines on the railroads, eh?" he chuckled.

John Studebaker rubbed his forehead with a brawny forearm.

"Mebbe," he agreed, "but I've a notion that sooner or later they'll be run by somethin' else beside steam. Yuh know that black oil they started diggin' out of the ground in Pennsylvania, back in Fifty-nine? They're findin' that oil in lots of places now-days.

I've a notion that some day that'll be the stuff they'll use to run them hossless wagons with."

"Shucks, that stuff ain't good for nothin' but to burn in lamps," Adams scoffed.

"It was a lamp filled with that kerosene oil that first give me my notion about it," Studebaker returned seriously. "Curt, I saw one of them lamps blow up once. It shore spoiled the lamp! Well, yuh know, a steam engine is run by water sort of explodin' when it gets hot, and makin' a sort of gas we call steam. Now if some smart jigger could just figger a way to make that oil stuff explode in little bits, not all at once, he'd get a gas what would run an engine better'n steam.

"Yuh wouldn't need to heat it with wood or coal, and yuh'd get more power without so much weight to pack along. I don't know how to do it. I just got the notion, but some jigger is goin' to figger it out some day, yuh see if he don't. Then we'll have wagons without hosses, plenty of 'em."

"We'll always need hosses, or mules," Adams replied. "But good luck to yuh, John, and hope yuh get yore wagon factory goin'."

They left the forge, Adams still chuckling over John Studebaker's "queer notions". He shook his head and made a significant gesture.

"I like John, like him a heap," he said, "but I'm sort of scared he's got a screw loose."

"Mebbe, and then again mebbe not," Harley replied gravely. "Yuh can't tell about fellers like him. I recollect my granddad tellin' about how folks laughed at the railroad engines, said they could never pull a train fast enough to compete with a good hoss, and now look at 'em!"

"That's so," Adams admitted. "We got a lot of fellers with funny notions in this town. Now there's Phil Armour—Philip D. Armour he has on his butcher shop window. He's got a notion about packin' meat and shippin' it on the railroad.

"This feller Armour figgers it can be froze and kept that way in railroad cars built so's yuh can pack cakes of ice in the ends, and shipped all over the country. Phil has got big notions for a feller runnin' such a little shop. He's a worker, though. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if the day comes when he owns three or four butcher shops strung around in different towns."

They returned to Main Street. "Think I'll hit the hay," Adams observed. "Didn't get much sleep last night on account of that darn fire. You ready to turn in?"

"Figger to ramble around a mite yet," Harley returned. "Want to look over some of the places and the folks here."

"All right," Adams agreed. "Our sleepin' quarters are on the second floor of the station buildin'. Westbrook, the agent, said for you to take the first room on the right at the head of the stairs. It's the best one in the house. He aimed to fix it up a mite special for yuh,"

"Nice of him," Harley replied. "All right, I'll see yuh in the morning."

ADAMS rolled off to bed. Harley sauntered along the street and finally entered a saloon that boasted wide windows of plate glass. He found the big room well crowded. It was an unusually ornate place for a mining town, he thought. The bar was highly polished and the great mirror-blazing back-bar was clustered with bottles of various shapes and colors. The barkeeps wore white aprons.

"Name yore pizen, cowboy," one of them cheerfully invited Harley. "We got prime likker, and we give a free snake with every third drink."

Harley sipped his drink, and glanced around with interest.

"Got Matt Dickson's place beat all hollow for show," he thought, "and the crowd is sort of different, in spots."

He ran his eyes over the bearded miners in corduroys, red, blue or plaid woolen shirts and muddy boots. He noted that there were quite a few individuals present who wore the unmistakeable garb of the range.

"Must be some big spreads somewhere in the section," he decided. "And"—his eyes narrowed slightly—"there are quite a few gents hereabouts who haven't got any rope or brandin' iron or pick handle calluses on their hands, too. Same kind of sidewinders I used see at Webb, in Dickson's place and others there. I've a notion there are rich pickin's around here for shady jiggers. Wonder how the games are run? Mebbe on the up-and-up, but the chances are they're not. Well, I'm through with all that, but the things I learned from Dickson still might come in handy. Yuh never can tell."

An individual occupying a place at the bar near where Harley stood attracted the Texan's attention. He was a tall, clear-eyed,

deep-chested man in patched and frayed garments.

He undoubtedly was well on the way to acquiring a snootful of red-eye, and was thoroughly enjoying himself in the process. He was paying for his drinks with gold dust from a plump pouch that reposed on the bar in front of him. As the fiery liquor heated his blood, his tongue was loosened, and he became more and more hospitable.

"Drink up, gents," he requested three quiet, hard-faced hombres who stood on his left. "Drink up. I got the stuff to pay for 'em with, and there's plenty more where this come from. I tell yuh my pard and me have struck it rich. There's plenty for us, and plenty for anybody else who wants to take a try at Dead Man's Gulch. She's a holy terror, and I don't mean mebbe, but the stuff's there, loads of it. Look here, will yuh!"

From capacious pockets he fished three more pokes as plumped out as the one in front of him. They thumped solidly on the bar.

"Dust!" he chortled, "and nuggets! Hard to come by—nothin' to eat, mighty little water, dust and sun! But the stuff's there, waitin' to be dug out. Dead Man's Gulch! Plenty of bones there, too. She's a terror, but she pays off!"

There were avaricious gleams in the eyes of the questionable trio as they stared at the plump pokes the miner proceeded to stow away in his pockets. One of the three tried to engage him in conversation, in low tones, but the miner's temporarily aroused interest strayed with drunken inconsistency. He caught Harley's eye, and drank to him with a merry flash of his broad white teeth.

"Put 'er down, feller, and fill up another one!" he shouted. "Yuh look to be my sort of folks. Come along with me to Dead Man's Gulch and get rich."

"Scared I'm not much of a miner," Harley said, and smiled broadly. "But," he added thoughtfully, "I might ride out to visit yuh some time soon."

"Do that," encouraged the miner. "My pard and me will be glad to see yuh. He's out there right now, keepin' a eye on our claim. But there's plenty more good ground, and we sort of hanker for company."

Harley noticed that others were beginning to take an interest in the bibulous gold digger, although a brand different from the furtive attention focused on him by the three individuals at the bar. His talk of "good ground" appeared to be impressing some of the miners grouped nearby.

"There's always some likkered-up gent talkin' a heap about findin' the Mother Lode, but this feller seems sort of genuine," Harley overheard one miner observe gravely to a companion. "Mebbe he has found somethin' down in that tilted-up section of perdition. Nobody else ever did, but yuh never can tell."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed the other man. "Folks tripped up over the Comstock rocks and cussed 'em for years before somebody came along smart enough to figger the black stuff clutterin' up their gold pans was silver. There might be somethin' to the big medicine that jigger's makin'."

"Could be," the interested miner agreed. "If there is, yuh'll shore see a rush to Dead Man's Gulch. But it'll be a hefty chore, packin' supplies into them gullies."

WADE HARLEY'S brows drew together thoughtfully, and there was a speculative gleam in his green eyes as he pondered the last words he had overheard.

For some time the big miner beside Wade Harley chattered and drank, but gradually he grew quieter. Finally he hitched up his pants, cuffed his ragged hat over one eye and squared his broad shoulders.

"Got to straighten up and get goin'," he mumbled to Harley. "Lot to do tomorrer. Got to get grub together and pack it out to my pard. We been runinn' mighty low. See yuh in the mornin', feller, if yuh're still stickin' around?"

"I've a notion yuh will," Harley replied.

The miner nodded. "Well, so long," he said. "Goin' to bed."

"Good notion," Harley agreed. "*Adios.*"

The miner ducked his shaggy head and lurched to the swinging doors. Harley thoughtfully watched him pass through them. He turned back to the bar, and realized that the three men who had been crowding on the other side of the miner had also disappeared.

He ran a questioning glance over the room. It centered on a second set of swinging doors in the far wall. Through them a man's back was just vanishing. He hesitated a moment more then placed his empty glass on the bar and sauntered to the entrance which had been used by the big miner.

Outside, he paused, and glanced up and down the street. The crowd had thinned out

somewhat and he quickly spotted his man weaving rather unsteadily down the street. He followed with easy strides, gradually closing the distance between them.

The miner did not pause in the busier section of the town. His gait slowed somewhat as he and the man following him passed the region of lighted windows. Harley drew a little closer. The dark mouths of alleys and side streets yawned onto the main thoroughfare. The noise of the business section was dulled here and he could distinctly hear the waters of Hangtown Creek worrying over its rocky bed.

The miner lurched past an alley mouth, his head bent, his feet dragging wearily. From the alley darted furtive shadows. Harley saw the miner throw his arm up, then reel back with a cry of pain. The man from Texas bounded forward and was almost upon the three figures that surrounded their victim before he was noticed.

One of the men gave warning yelp and whirled to face the Texan. Harley saw a gleam of metal and hurled himself sideward. Flame spurted toward him. There was a booming report and he felt the burn of a bullet along his ribs.

Then both his big Colts let go with a rattling crash.

One of the miner's attackers slumped to the ground without a sound. A second staggered back, howling a curse and clutching at a blood-spurting arm. The third ducked under Harley's guns and closed with him. Harley saw the flash of a knife before his eyes. He warded off the lunging steel with the barrel of his Colt, then slashed downward with the clubbed six. There was a solid crunch of the heavy barrel on bone and the knife wielder went down.

He lashed out with the blade, narrowly missing the Texan's leg. Harley kicked the knife from his attacker's hand and ground the fellow's wrist under his boot heel. The man roared with pain, and tried to rise. Harley holstered one gun, gripped the struggling knife wielder by the collar, jerked him to his feet and held him powerless at arm's length.

"Another try and yuh get it dead center," he growled, setting the cold rim of his gun against the drygulcher's forehead.

The man subsided, whimpering for mercy. The man Harley's slug had wounded in the arm started to stagger off, but the big miner was in the fray now, and he jumped on the wounded man's back and hurled him to the ground.

From up the street same a sound of shouting, and of boots pounding in their direction. A moment later they were surrounded by a jostling throng of men who volleyed questions at them.

"These skunks tried to do me in and lift my pokes!" the miner bawled from where he sat solidly on the cursing drygulcher. "If it hadn't been for that big cowboy feller they would of done it, too. He fixed 'em!"

Oaths and ominous growls greeted the explanation. Hard eyes glowered at the two captives. A lanky old man with a big silver badge pinned to his shirt pushed his way through the crowd.

"What's goin' on here?" he demanded. His face grew bleak as a chorus of voices enlightened him.

"Here comes the *alcalde!*" someone shouted.

A BULKY man with an authoritative manner shoved to the front. He gloomed at the captives from deep-set eyes.

"Bring 'em along, Marshal," he directed the man with the badge. "We're goin' to hold court. Never mind about that one lyin' on the ground over there. All the attention he needs can be given him with a shovel."

The lanky marshal collared his prisoners and shoved them along in front of him.

"Come along, you fellers," he ordered Harley and the miner.

Under the great oak tree at the corner of Main and Coloma Streets the procession halted. Torches were brought to augment the street lights. The *alcalde* seated himself in a chair that had hurriedly been procured from a nearby saloon. From the now silent crowd he proceeded to pick a jury, to which he swiftly administered the oath.

He called on the miner to testify, the requested Harley to tell what he knew of the affair. When the Texan had finished speaking the *alcalde* turned to the jury.

"Arrived at a verdict, gents?" he asked.

The man who had been chosen jury foreman spat reflectively and cocked an eye in the direction of the spreading branches of the great oak.

"I reckon that big limb stretchin' over this way is strong enough to hold 'em both," he drawled.

His fellow jury members solemnly nodded.

A few minutes later, Wade Harley turned

away from the kicking, strangling figures at the ends of the ropes that had been tossed over the stout branch of the oak. The big miner joined him.

"Blazes!" the miner muttered as they headed down the street. "I don't know which is worse in this blasted town—the owlhoots or the men of the law!"

CHAPTER X

On the Sacramento Trail

HARLEY cleaned and oiled his hardware before settling down to sleep. As is common with men who ride much alone, he not only had a habit of talking to his horse, but even to his guns. Now he held converse with the big Colts as he put them in shape.

"Yes, suh, I've a hunch it'll work," he remarked aloud, squinting through a gleaming barrel. "If that miner—Pete Mossman he says his name is—is right about Dead Man's Gulch, and I've a notion he is, it'll work. Worth giving a twirl, anyhow. Yes, I've a plumb notion business is goin' to pick up for the Great Divide."

The following morning, Harley approached the agent, Westbrook, asking for information.

"Shore there's a saddle hoss in the barn," Westbrook replied in answer to the question. "A couple good ones. Figger to take a ride?"

"Uh-huh." Harley nodded. "Goin' to ride down to Dead Man's Gulch with Pete Mossman, the miner who got mixed up in the shindig last night."

Westbrook stared. "Aimin' to stake a claim?" he asked.

"Yes," Harley replied gravely. "I am, one that'll deal paydirt, too, or I'm a heap mistaken. But I'm not goin' to stake it on the ground."

Westbrook looked puzzled, but Harley did not elucidate. Abruptly he changed the topic of conversation.

"Have we any spare coaches on hand?" he asked.

"Shore," the agent replied. "We got four in the barns here, ready for emergencies, and there's another one at Tahoe, and half a dozen more at Virginia City. Yore uncle laid in plenty of equipment. Figgered he might need it some day. Why?"

"Just wonderin'," Harley answered. "How about mules?"

"Plenty of mules," said the agent, "and if we need more, we can get 'em from the Bradded H Ranch down the valley a piece. That's the ranch yore uncle owned. The Virginia City Bank has control of it, I understand. Yore uncle's foreman, Lake Bell, a fine old jigger, runs it. There's an arrangement between the Great Divide and the bank to supply us with what stock we need."

Harley nodded thoughtfully. He asked another question.

"And the Great Divide has some money to its credit in the bank?"

Westbrook nodded. "A small balance here in Hangtown, and a bit more in Virginia City. Enough to scratch along on. Bill Turner, the agent at Virginia City, can tell yuh more about it than I can. He's been handlin' that end of the business. Reckon yuh'd better have a talk with Turner and the folks at the bank in Virginia City. They can give yuh the whole information. I understand instructions were left by yore uncle to that effect."

"All right," Harley agreed. "Let's take a look at those hosses."

Of the two animals available, Harley chose a sturdy bay that had a look of speed and endurance.. Suitable riding gear was forthcoming. He saddled the bay and tied him to the rack in front of the station.

The eastbound stage had just pulled out when the miner, Pete Mossman, appeared riding a bony, rat-tailed mule and leading two others loaded with supplies. He was clear-eyed and cheerful as a cricket, despite his extensive potations of the night before.

"All set to go, pard?" he whooped at Harley.

"Right with yuh," the Texan replied, and turned to the agent. "See yuh in a day or two," he told Westbrook. "Then we'll have another talk."

As Harley and Mossman rode out of Hangtown, Harley observed that they did not ride unnoticed. Quite a few citizens eyed them with interest, and he noted that several groups had their heads together and appeared to be discussing something. The men in the groups nodded, shot glances at the passing pair, but proferred no comment that was audible.

"I've a notion the boys are a mite worked up," chuckled Mossman. "The stuff I showed 'em last night is beginnin' to sink in, and you ridin' out this way with me is puzzlin' 'em. I've a notion, feller, we may be headin' a stampede. Well, there's plenty of good ground for everybody over where we're goin'. I always had faith in that section of burned-over perdition, and I've proved I was right. Dead Man's Gulch is liable to make the Hangtown diggin's look mighty small potaters before she's finished."

For several miles after leaving Hangtown, their route followed the main Sacramento Trail. Harley gazed with an appreciative eye on the surroundings. His interest quickened when he began to notice fat beefs grazing on the rich grass.

"Fine rangeland hereabouts," he observed to his saddle companion.

"Shore is—never see better," Mossman agreed. "I've a notion, feller, before all's said and done, there's goin' to be more took off the top of this ground than from underneath it. The day's comin' when the big money will come out of meat and grain and fruit and such things. Mark my word, there'll be a time when it'll be oranges and wheat and cattle folks will think of when they talk about Californy, and not gold and silver."

THEY left the town a little more than a mile behind them when they observed two riders approaching. One was tall and broad-shouldered, the other slight and graceful. Soon Harley was surprised to recognize Branch Bascomb and Alison Lee.

Alison's chin tilted in the air as the pair drew near, but Bascomb, after a start of surprise and a keen glance at Harley's freshly shaven face, waved a greeting. His voice boomed bluff heartiness.

"Goin' for a little ride?" he inquired amiably. "Nice mornin' for one. We're headin' back to town from the Tree L, the little ranch Miss Lee's father owned. Hardly knew yuh at first, without yore whiskers. Yuh don't look so much like old Andy without 'em. Never saw Andy Harley without whiskers." He smiled pleasantly. "Well, now that yuh're here to take charge of things, I hope the Virginia and Western and the Great Divide can pull together better than they have been doin'."

"Two teams pullin' together can get more done than when they're pullin' against each other," Harley agreed. "This country looks big enough to provide room for everybody."

"That's right." Bascomb nodded. "Drop in and see me some time when yuh get back to town."

With a wave of his hand he rode on. He did not look back. But Harley saw Alison Lee's bright head turn, and he caught a flash of her blue eyes before she faced quickly to the front again.

Pete Mossman gazed speculatively at Branch Bascomb's broad back.

"I never could make that feller out," he remarked musingly. "He smiles at yuh like a horned toad grins—with his mouth. The smile never gets up to his eyes. He's smart, though, and a cold proposition. I always have a feelin' that I've seen him somewheres before. In some camp, mebbe. But I've been to so many camps in the past dozen years, it's hard to figger which one. Besides, he's got a look about him that's common to a certain breed. He'd look plumb at home behind a gamin' table—with a cold deck up one sleeve and a double-barreled derringer in the other. And I've a notion he'd know how to handle both. Uh-huh, a cold proposition."

Harley nodded thoughtfully, but did not comment.

"I like that gal, though," Mossman resumed a little later. "Of course, bein' a redhead, she's a spitfire, but she's all right. I recollect her ridin' around with old Jackson Lee before he got done in. Everybody thought well of her, and do yet, I reckon. Wonder if she is goin' to marry that lizard-eyed jigger?"

Again Wade Harley refrained from comment, but his lips tightened perceptibly.

As they rode, they passed more and more cattle. Suddenly a troop of horsemen came skalleyhootin' across the rolling rangeland, saddle leather popping, bridle irons jingling. Their vivid neck cloths a flash of color against their blue shirts, their broad-brimmed "J.B.'s" flopping in the wind, they swept past, waving hands and bawling jovial salutations. Wade Harley watched them vanish over the crest of a rise, and in his heart was a sudden sick longing. Pete Mossman glanced at him from the corners of his eyes.

"Sort of gets yuh, eh?" he remarked. "I know how yuh feel, feller, I used to twirl a rope over in Oklahomy, before I got bit by the gold huntin' bug. Once a cowman, always a cowman, I reckon. Between you and me, what I aim to do, when I scratch enough dust

and nuggets out of that dad-burned gulch, is to buy me a little spread and set up in business for myself. Gold diggin's give out after a while, but folks have always got to eat. Cows will always be with us."

Harley nodded sober agreement and they rode on.

"Now there," Mossman exclaimed abruptly, "is the sort of place I'd like to own. If I had that, I wouldn't give a hoot for all the gold in the Mother Lode."

He waved his hand toward a big white ranchhouse set on a hill amid a grove of spreading oaks, its 'dobe walls mellowed golden by the sunlight. Harley noted the tight barns and bunkhouse and other buildings, all in the best of shape.

"That's the Bradded H *casa,* that belonged to yore Uncle Andy Harley," said Mossman. "It's a pity he didn't leave yuh that, instead of that busted-down stage-coach line. I've heard talk that next year the Bradded H goes to some charitable organization to buy new pigtails for Chinese that get 'em bit off by rats, or somethin' like that. The Virginia bank has control of it till then, as I reckon yuh know. With all due respects to yore Uncle Andy, who was a fine old jigger when he was up and kickin', I've a feelin' he went plumb loco before he cashed in."

"Mebbe, but then again mebbe not," Harley returned. "Somehow or other, I been developin' a feelin' durin' the last few months that Uncle Andy knew just what he was doin' when he wished the Great Divide line on me."

"He shore always knew when he was alive," Mossman agreed.

A mile farther on he gestured toward a small building nestling in the shade of a steep rise.

"That's the Tree L *casa,*" he explained. "That's where old Jackson Lee lived. Not a very big spread, but I reckon Lee managed to scrape a livin' and a little extra from it. Comes to the girl next year when she's twenty-one, I've heard, but I s'pose Branch Bascomb has all the say about it till then."

"Looks like the Virginia and Western stage line was the only thing of much value Lee owned," Harley observed thoughtfully.

"Reckon that's right," Mossman nodded. "Figger he put all his spare dinero into it, which is mebbe why they're puttin' up such a fight now to make it pay big."

Soon they turned from the Sacramento Trail into a narrower track that curved sharply about until it ran in an easterly direction with a slight veer to the south. Harley surveyed the trail with keen interest, noting with care the steepness of the grades and the condition of the surface. As they progressed he nodded in a satisfied manner from time to time.

As they drew farther and farther away from the Sacramento Trail, the topography of the country gradually changed. The trail they traveled climbed steep slopes, coasted along high ridges where streams hundreds of feet below churned over sands that Mossman declared were rich with gold, and shot down into valleys. It wound through rolling hills that were burned white by the fierce summer sun.

"They're mighty green and purty in the spring, though," Mossman remarked, "and they won't be bad, either, later in the fall." He pointed to a stream that came in sight. "Over there to the south is Weber's Crik," he observed. "Feller named Charley Weber has got a store there. He trades beads and cloth to the Injuns for gold. The Injuns are gettin'

[*Turn page*]

CAN YOUR SCALP PASS THE
*F-N TEST?
*The Famous Finger Nail Test
1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head—if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.
YOUR HAIR CAN LOOK LIKE THIS WITH NEW
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
2 Only a little Wildroot Cream-Oil can do a big job for your hair. Keeps your hair well groomed all day long without a trace of that greasy, plastered down look! Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or toilet goods counter.
CREAM-OIL CHARLIE SAYS: "IT CONTAINS LANOLIN!"
3 And TUNE IN: 2 NETWORK SHOWS! "The Adventures of Sam Spade" Sun. evenings, CBS Network; "King Cole Trio Time" Sat. afternoons, NBC Network.
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC
LANOLIN

the worst of it, but they don't know it yet. Reckon Charley will get rich before the Injuns catch on they're on the losin' end of the bargain."

Harley nodded, still studying the trail. Nowhere, so far, had he noted anything that would make impractical the plan that was taking shape in his mind.

The country grew wilder and more rugged. To the east the mountains were a blue wall against the paler blue of the sky. They were tipped with dazzling white where the sunlight shimmered on their snows, or with somber black where the naked spires of rock were too steep to afford a place for the snow to cling. Great forests clothed their mighty shoulders.

As the afternoon lengthened, the wind, which had been blowing steadily from the west, increased perceptibly. Mossman's brow became furrowed.

"Too much wind is bad over where we're headin' for," he told Harley worriedly. "And it's beginnin' to look like a storm was blowin' up."

CHAPTER XI

Perdition's Front Door

RIDING on for a few more miles, Harley and the miner topped the crest of a long and steep ridge up which they had been toiling for the past hour. They pulled in to give their animals a breather. Harley stared unbelievingly at the scene spread out before his eyes.

He was confronted by a tremendous amphitheatre, a mighty yellow gulf or split in the sawtoothed hills that shouldered one above the other to the blue wall of the Sierras. At the bottom of the slope, was a three-mile wide desolation that rolled, arid and heat-blasted, to the mouth of the gulf. Grim dunes, devoid of vegetation, started up starkly from its surface. They were misted by a thin veil of dust and, as Harley gazed, they seemed subtly to change shape under the tearing fingers of the wind.

"They're just like the Superstition Mountains way down south toward Yuma," said Mossman. "Folks will tell yuh the Superstitions change shape and size and get different, so that they ain't worth a hoot as landmarks. That's right, they do. The Superstitions are just giant sand dunes and the wind changes and changes 'em. Them dunes down there below us are the same. They change shape and size, and even position. Don't ever try to make yore way by 'em."

Harley's gaze lifted from the gray desolation of the encroaching desert to the labyrinthine maze gashing the hills. It was a mystic region of steps and slopes and channels, torn by the teeth of rushing water, weirdly carved and sculped by the restless fingers of the wind.

The mounds and cone-shaped and fan-shaped ridges were of denuded, crinkly clay on which the fairy hands of erosion had limned tiny traceries as graceful and delicate as the veinings of a leaf. The coloring was a marvelous mosaic of golden amber, cream yellow, mauve, bronze and cinnamon nearest to the mouth of the gulf. Farther on were golds and yellows and russets merging higher on the side walls with delicately beautiful mouse color and strange pearly cream.

Higher were bands of gray, of heliotrope, of mineral green the color of the sea under the noonday sun, and higher still the deep wine of the waters when sunset is not far off. Near the crests of the side cliffs were bands of rusty red crowned by earthly browns streaked with lines of black.

Harley could see that farther back the gulf was a bowl of ghastly purple blotched and streaked with silver and ghostly white. How far the weird gorge extended into the hills he could not tell, but it gave an impression of infinite depth—a country of marl extending forever.

It was unreal, unbelievable, grim and forbidding, a veritable *Fata Morgana*, a land of fantasy, doubtless peopled by elementals, bodiless and unseen.

Despite the heat of the late afternoon sun, Harley felt cold as he gazed upon it. There was something of a dusty, open grave about the wide canyon of unknown depth—its dust was the dust of desiccated bones. Its hues were the hues of death and corruption. It was like to the mouth of a burned-out Hades that even demons could not abide.

"And that," said the voice of Pete Mossman, "is Dead Man's Gulch!"

As they descended the slope the wind steadily increased in violence. By the time they reached the desert floor, it was blowing

a gusty gale that raised the powdery sand in clouds. The sun shone a deep, weird magenta through the pall of yellow dust.

The sky was invisible, shrouded by the clouds of flying particles that were whipped up from the washes and ridges. The moving sand gave off an eerie rustling. The mouth of the gorge was obscured by sweeping, curling sheets of dust through which the weird sun shone like a red-orange moon seen through haze.

Heads bent, swathing their mouths in their neckerchiefs, they rode across the heat-tortured desert. As they neared the gulch they found it to be an awesome and terrible abyss of flying yellow shadows and filled with the shriek and moan of the wind. The tall bronze cliffs that walled it in on either side seemed to shudder under the elemental fury of the storm.

The trail into the gorge sloped downward. As they bore deeper into the nude and ghastly and burning hole of flying sand and menacing shadows, the pall of dust and the roar of the storm seemed to be above them. Around them was a comparative hush as they rode in a strange yellow twilight. The sun shone a darker magenta and appeared larger. The fine siftings of dust that fell upon them seemed like invisible sparks of fire.

Interminably the yellow-walled gorge wound this way and that, steadily widening, its floor a series of yellow ridges, soft and curved and colorful. But they were almost level, and as the horses plodded wearily over their crinkly surface, they began to discover shades of earth brown, and ledges of rock. The gale above roared hollowly and the dust particles still fell, but it seemed to Harley that the air was freshening somewhat, the heat becoming less intense.

GRADUALLY the lifeless yellow clay was supplanted by broader and broader patches of brown earth. As the air cleared, Harley saw that the cliffs were replaced by mighty slopes that slanted steeply upward for a full two thousand feet. The lower segments of the slopes were of gravel, sand and fine shale, but the upper two-thirds was a drab, million-faceted ascent of rocks.

The whole mountainside was wearing down, weathering away, cracking into millions of pieces, every one of which had both smooth and sharp surfaces. As the slope ascended, the rocks grew smaller. It resembled the flow of a glacier. It was a suspended avalanche, perhaps sliding inch by inch and foot by foot, all the time.

Crowning the slope for three hundred feet toward the crest was a stupendous wall of rock, seamed and cracked and fissured, hanging in threatening gloom over the slope and the floor of the gorge. And above the perpendicular battlement was yet another slope of broken rocks extending to the far-off crest, hanging there as if by magic, every one of the endless heaps and scattering of stones leaning ready to roll.

Frost and heat had disintegrated the whole surface of the mountain throughout uncounted ages of unwritten time. The dying sunlight flashed and glittered on the myriad facets of gray granite with an awesome and sinister beauty. From the cracked and blazing mirror, the heat beat downward in scorching waves.

"There she is," said Mossman, gesturing toward the band of gravel that flanked the gorge floor. "There's the diggin's, and, feller, she's rich, though she's so cursed hard to work."

Harley stared upward at the mountain of unstable rock towering dark and terrible and forbidding even in the broad light of day. He gave a low whistle.

"If those rocks ever started to roll!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, they roll every now and then," Mossman returned cheerfully. "Look there!"

Even as he spoke, a weathered fragment loosened from the heights, rolled off the upper wall and pitched clear into the air, to crack ringingly below and bound and hurtle down the lower slope until at last it came to rest with a final hollow report.

"They don't often get down this far," Mossman explained. "One whizzed right over John and me one day and busted all to pieces when it hit the ground. Must have weighed nigh onto a hundred pounds, but it missed us."

"But suppose one of them starts the whole slope to moving?" Harley asked.

Mossman shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Well, I reckon it wouldn't matter much to a feller who happened to be down here at the time," he replied. "The jigger would just be restin' easy with about a million tons of stuff on top of him, that's all."

"Yes, that's all," Harley agreed slowly.

They rode on up the gorge, past the gravel belt and the shattered slope, which extended

for more than two miles and was finally supplanted by earthy slopes covered with sun-blasted brush. They rounded a final turn, the gorge opened out into a great bowl that was roughly circular, and the scene spread before their eyes became much more cheerful.

The bowl, which was walled about by tall cliffs, was a full two miles in diameter, fairly wooded, and showed signs of water.

"Uh-huh, there's springs in here," Mossman replied to Harley's question. "Several good ones, but the water don't never get down into the lower gulch. It just runs across this cup and into holes under the cliffs. It's purty up here, specially in the evenin', when she gets nice and cool. Good place for a town."

Harley agreed, with a pleased feeling. He conned over in his mind the route they had followed to reach the gulch. While difficult, nowhere was it impossible to negotiate. He nodded with satisfaction as he realized the plan he had formulated was practical. His eyes glowed with anticipation.

Harley smelled smoke. Soon he saw it, a thin blue streamer rising straight into the air that, here in the depths of the sheltered bowl, was strangely still at variance with the tumult in the mouth of the gorge.

"That's our camp, over the other side of that thicket, beside a big spring," said Mossman. "Reckon John is gettin' supper ready. He'd figger me to be showin' up about now."

He cast a glance toward the west rim of the bowl. The fiery sun was poised directly over it, like a smoky orange balanced on the edge of a wineglass.

MOSSMAN raised his voice in a stentorian shout. An answering call came from beyond the thicket. A moment later a man appeared, advancing toward them.

"Hi-yuh, John?" bawled Mossman. "Come and know Wade Harley, a feller I'm a heap beholdin' to. Harley, this is John Evers, my pard."

Evers was a squat, brawny man with mighty shoulders and abnormally long, gorillalike arms. His face, what could be seen of it for hair, was burned almost black by the sun and wind, but he had twinkling brown eyes and a firm handclasp.

"Come and eat," he invited cordially. "I'm just ready to set the chuck out. How you feelin', Pete? Get a snootful of red-eye while yuh were in town?"

"More'n I had any business to get," grunted Mossman. "Came mighty nigh to gettin' me in bad trouble. If it hadn't been for Harley, I reckon it would have. Tell yuh about it while we eat."

Ten minutes later, when the horses and mules had been cared for, Harley sat beside the fire that burned outside the rude but comfortable hut which sheltered the prospectors, and watched the sun go down behind the western rim of the gorge.

The sunset in that great solemn place was a wonderful thing to see. First all the vast cup was filled with light like a bowl with fire. Then, as the sun vanished behind the western wall, half of the level floor became quite dark, while shadows seemed to rush forward over the eastern part of its surface, till that too was swallowed up in gloom.

For a little while there remained only a glow reflected from the cliff face and the sky above, while on the crest of the parapet of rock played strange and glorious fires. The sky was tenderest blue that quickly softened to orange and pink and tremulous rose. This changed to softest gray, deepened to almost black, while over the western rim a great star pulsed and trembled like a bead of silver hung against a curtain of dark velvet.

Then star after star pricked through the velevet arch like needle points, until the far-reaching dome was spangled with glittering sparks that seemed to brush the mountain tops. The bowl itself was deathly silent, but ever and anon came the rush and crackle of a loosened stone bounding down the boulder-strewn slope at the mouth of the gorge.

As they ate, Mossman surveyed the shadowy surface of the bowl with approving eyes.

"A fine place for a town," he observed again at length, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "And I bet yuh we have one here, sooner or later. One that'll make Hangtown look like peanuts. What you think, Harley?"

"I've a notion yuh might have the right idea, Pete," the Texan returned. "That is if the boys up to Hangtown figger to trail down this way."

"They'll figger, see if they don't," Mossman prophesied confidently.

Mossman and his partner slept soundly during the night, but Harley's sleep was disturbed by the intermittent boom and crackle of loosened stones hurtling down the slope below the bowl.

"Workin' that gravel belt is goin' to be hard on the nerves," he told himself. "But men will do anything for gold. Nothin' but gold could bring men into that naked, burning Tophet of flying dust and rollin' stones—but it'll bring 'em!"

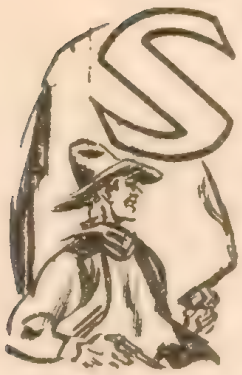
Pete Mossman proved himself no false prophet. In deference to their unexpected guest, the partners decided to take it easy the following morning. All three were smoking comfortably in the shade of the cabin at noon when six men leading a string of pack mules rode into view.

"Hi-yuh, Pete, yuh old ringtail!" bellowed one of them. "We've come to squat in yore kittle of Hades for a spell. If she don't size up to what yuh claimed, we'll skin yuh alive."

"She ain't no good for lazy varmints like you, Splinter," Mossman returned, "but for gents willin' to work she's paydirt. Light down and cool yore saddles while we rustle a helpin'. After we eat we'll take yuh down and show yuh the best place to stake out."

CHAPTER XII

Moonlight—and Dreams



SOME time before sunset, the new arrivals in Dead man's Gulch expressed the opinion that the ground was "fair to middlin' and mebbe a mite better." Mossman and Evers had their claim nearest the mouth of the gulch.

"She's hottest and dustiest down here, but the best ground," Evers pointed out.

The others agreed, and staked their claims accordingly. One grizzled old-timer, after taking specimens of the gravel at various points, declared that the prospect was "almighty promisin'."

"But them rocks up there!" one of them protested. "If they ever start to roll good—gentlemen, hush!"

"It won't bother young fellers like us who can skip around handy, but spavined old coots like you, Ballou, will have to stir yore stumps if that time comes," predicted the cheerful "Splinter."

"The natural effervescence of the predestined will correlate torpidity with monostrophics if such a predicament should become nubilous," replied Ballou, who had a habit of using ponderous words through sheer love of their sound and with scant regard for their meaning.

"Reckon yuh got me there, pard," replied Splinter in awed tones. "Try me in United States."

Just as sunset was flooding the sky with scarlet and gold, Wade Harley rode out of Dead Man's Gulch on the return trip to Hangtown.

"I figger it'll be cooler travelin' at night," he explained to Mossman, "and I want to be in town early tomorrow. Got a heap of things to look after. Take care of yoreselves, and good luck. "

"*Gracias,*" replied the prospector. "Sorry yuh won't stake a claim and get rich with us, feller."

"Mebbe I am stakin' one," Harley told him with the shadow of a smile. "Reckon we'll know before long if it's paydirt."

"Now just what did the seven-foot jigger mean by that?" wondered Mossman as Harley vanished into the thicket below the camp.

"Doubtless his hagiagrapha will contredanse his contravalations," returned old Ballou, adding in a lapse of lucid speech, "That young feller has got plenty of wrinkles on his horns, and don't yuh forget it, Pete. He's as smart as a treeful of owls. I figger he's liable to spring somethin' surprisin' on us before he's finished."

With the stars a silver net of glory over his head and the desert a shadowy purple mystery at his feet, Wade Harley rode north by west toward Hangtown. Tall and lithe and graceful, he lounged comfortably in the saddle with the easy carelessness of one born to a horse's back. He whistled cheerfully from time to time, and once he sang a rollicking old cowboy song in a voice as deep and musical as the white waters in the black gorges of the Sierras:

> Up and up the trail goes climbin',
> Just a-reachin' for the moon,
> While the wind walks in the treetops,
> Trompin' out a little tune;
> Oh, it's hill, and sag, and valley,
> With the trail a-windin' free,
> And a red-haired gal a-waitin',
> Yes, a-waitin' just for me!

The rich, full voice stilled abruptly, and Wade Harley chuckled drily.

"Uh-huh, a-waitin' with a shotgun, judging from the look she gave me yesterday morning!" he remarked aloud. . . .

Dawn was breaking when Wade Harley rode into Hangtown. He stabled his horse, got himself some breakfast and then routed out Westbrook, the agent. Soon the station was buzzing with activity. That afternoon startled citizen stood in gabbling groups and stared at three great coaches standing in front of the Great Divide station. Tacked to their sides were flaunting red signs that read:

STAGE TO DEAD MAN'S GULCH, CALIFORNIA'S NEWEST AND RICHEST GOLD STRIKE. ACCOMMODATIONS FOR UP-AND-COMING GENTS AND THEIR TRUCK.

The three coaches pulled out of Hangtown the following morning, crowded with cheering, excited miners who hung from the windows and clung to the roofs. Every available inch of space was crammed with tools and supplies. Wade Harley himself sat on the driver's seat of the foremost coach.

The last thing Harley saw before pulling out was Branch Bascomb standing across the street, his face as black as a thundercloud. Beside him stood Alison Lee, her blue eyes wide and bright. He smiled down at her from his lofty perch. She half raised a sun-golden little hand to wave acknowledgement, then abruptly stiffened and looked the other way.

Harley grinned, and sent the multiple lashes of his whip snarling and whistling over the backs of the squealing mules.

THREE days later Harley sat with Westbrook in the agent's office and checked columns of figures.

"Boss, yuh hit a ten-strike!" Westbrook exulted. "We're booked for everythin' we can pack for days in advance. Yes, suh, business is boomin'!"

"I'm takin' the stage to Virginia City tomorrow," Harley observed thoughtfully. "I aim to have a talk with Turner and the Virginia Bank officials and see if I can find out just how we stand. I think, too, that I'll bring the stage back to Hangtown. I want to become more familiar wih the route and see if it can't be improved. I've got a notion it can."

"How?" Westbrook wondered. "Yore Uncle Andy was a purty good road builder and I reckon he didn't miss no bets."

"Mebbe not," Harley agreed. "but I'm playin' a hunch. I got a notion about somethin'. Mebbe it's just a notion, but then again mebbe it isn't. We'll see. How are Bascomb and the Virginia and Western takin' things?"

"I hear Bascomb is fit to be roped and hogtied," the agent replied. "He don't take it kind yuh gettin' the jump on him like yuh did. I heard he figgered on startin' a rival line to Dead Man's Gulch, but John Studebaker and Phil Armour and the other prominent gents here sort of disapproved. They allowed it wasn't exactly sportin' to try and horn in on what you figgered out and set goin'. Bascomb pulled in his horns.

"By the way," he added, "old George Hearst dropped in yesterday on his way to Virginia City. He seemed tickled pink over the Dead Man's Gulch business. That lawyer feller Stewart was with him. Him and Stewart looked at each other and chuckled and chuckled. Wonder what them two old coots got on their minds?"

Harley didn't know, and decided not to waste time guessing.

Harley drove the Virginia City stage the following morning. At the mouth of the cleft that cut into the narrow, steep and crooked stretch of trail west of the bridge that spanned the gorge, he pulled the coach to a halt and sat for some minutes gazing into the gloomy fissure.

"I'm plumb curious as to where that crack in the hills leads to," he told Adams, the shotgun guard. "Wish I could see farther around that shoulder of rock. Figger I'll take a ride into there some day soon."

"I ain't never been in there," Adams replied, "but I heard yore Uncle Andy say she turns beyond the shoulder and cuts more west than south through the hills for a long ways, and ends up a box. Funny, Andy Harley was curious about that crack, too. Somethin' about it seemed to puzzle him. I've seen him pull up just like you did and sit lookin' in there and growlin' under his whiskers."

"He ever say what was on his mind?" asked Wade Harley.

"Well," said Adams, "he seemed to have some notion about it—a notion that didn't work out, and it bothered him. He told me once that it is an awful hole, with the floor slopin' down all the time and the walls gettin' higher and higher till yuh can't hardly see the sky. Runs for miles and miles and ends up against a wall of rock as high as the side walls.

"He figgered there must have been a awful lot of water runnin' through there once,

mebbe thousands and thousands of years back. Said the rocks are all water-worn and rounded and the side walls wore smooth. He wondered if the slope wasn't in this direction once instead of to the west, with water runnin' this way and fallin' into the canyon. He couldn't figger where all that water could have come from."

"This was a glacier region," Harley explained. "That crack might once upon a time have been a drain for the water from a meltin' glacier runnin' down the hills. But I don't figger the slope would have reversed itself. I've a notion it always sloped from east to west."

"Then where did he water got to?" Adams asked.

Harley shrugged his broad shoulders.

"That's somethin' I'd like to know," he said. "Isn't there any water in there now?"

"Andy told me there was a purty good-sized spring runnin' out from under a cliff back in there a ways," he replied. "He said it made a little stream that runs into a crack under the end box wall of the canyon."

"Runs into a crack under the end wall?" Harley repeated quickly

"That's right." Adams nodded. "Just a little crack in the cliff, or so yore uncle said."

HARLEY nodded thoughtfully, and spoke to the mules. As they negotiated the narrow, winding slope ahead, he more than once turned to stare back toward the cleft, a deep furrow between his black brows.

After a talk with Turner, the Virginia City agent, Harley visited the Virginia City Bank. William Landers, the president of the bank, received him cordially enough, but could give him little information.

"Your uncle was a strange man, but an almighty shrewd one," the banker said. "The agreement under which the bank took over the management of his big ranch and his mine holdings until the day of the complete reading of his will is an airtight document or I never saw one. In fact, it was drawn up by the smartest lawyer in this state, William M. Stewart. Its specifications are very precise and admit of no compromise."

"And yuh don't know what becomes of the properties after yore trusteeship ends?" Harley asked.

Banker Landers threw out his hands in an expressive gesture.

"So far as I am able to say," he replied, "there are only two men who know. One is Stewart, who drew up the papers. The other is John Arbuckle of Webb, Texas, the executor of the will. Arbuckle told you nothing?"

A fleeting grin crossed Harley's bronzed face.

"I left Webb in sort of a hurry," he drawled. "Old John and I didn't have time for much talk. Mebbe he would have dropped a hint if I'd stayed on with him. When he read that first provision of the will, turning over the Great Divide to me, I was kind of flabbergasted and bounced out of his office. Right after that things got a mite mixed up and Arbuckle decided a little ride would be good for my health. It was like this—"

In a few terse sentences he acquainted the banker with the happenings in Matt Dickson's saloon. The old president nodded a wise head.

"Looks like things might have worked out for the best," he opined.

Harley nodded agreement.

"Uh-huh, looks that way," he admitted, "I didn't figger to at the time, but for quite a spell I'd been makin' a plumb fool out of myself. What happened brought me up with a round turn. All of a sudden I saw myself for what I was, and I realized how Dickson had been leadin' me on, figgerin' I'd come into a heap of dinero when my uncle cashed in. Uh-huh, somebody once said. 'There's no fool like an old fool', but I reckon a young one on the loose can give any old-timer a run for his money."

The banker chuckled.

"Let me compliment you on acquiring considerable wisdom at an early age," Landers said. He shot a shrewd glance at the tall Texan. "You don't regret coming here and taking over the stage line, then?"

Harley's green eyes glowed.

"Having the time of my life," he declared, "and I figger to have a still better time befor I'm finished. I don't aim to get rich on the Great Divide, but I do reckon the line will make me a livin', and mebbe a little to set aside toward tyin' onto a cattle spread some time. Reckon I've got the cow business in my blood."

"It's a good business," said the banker, "and I sincerely hope you realize your ambition. Incidentally, I would advise that you write to John Arbuckle without delay and acquaint him with your whereabouts."

"I'll do that," Harley replied. "I'm sort of

curious as to what happened to Matt Dickson. He was a hydrophobia skunk if there ever was one, but I didn't do for him."

Landers nodded. "The less blood a man has on his hands, the better he sleeps of nights. I was not exactly tame in my own youth," he added, a sudden gleam in his frosty eyes, "and I know whereof I speak. Don't delay writing Arbuckle. I feel that he will be pleased to know you are here."

"That's right," Harley agreed. "I recollect he looked as pleased as a cat on the outside of a fat mouse as I rode out of Webb. I've a notion," he added suddenly, "that old John figgered I'd end up here!"

CHAPTER XIII

Dinner for Two

LANDERS chuckled at Harley's surprise at his own statement, but did not comment. Harley hesitated a moment before he went on with what he had to say.

"By the way," he said at length, "I've heard a story that Uncle Andy's properties will go to certain charities when the final reading of his will takes place."

The banker shrugged. "I've heard that story, too," he admitted, "but I don't know where it started. One thing is certain, neither Stewart nor John Arbuckle have passed on any information relative to the ultimate disposal of the properties. Of course, Andrew Harley might have confided his intentions in someone else. As to that I cannot say. He never had many close associates. Jackson Lee was about the only real intimate I ever knew him to have, and Lee died before Harley did."

Wade Harley considered a moment, then abruptly asked a question:

"Yuh know Jackson Lee's daughter, suh?"

"Alison?" Landers smiled. "I've known her since she was a baby in arms. She's grown up to be a mighty fine young woman."

Harley nodded emphatic agreement. The banker shot him a shrewd glance, then suddenly looked at his watch.

"Wade," he said, "I have an appointment, but there is something else I'd like to say to you. Could you find it convenient to come back an hour from now?"

"Be glad to," Harley agreed, looking somewhat surprised, for it seemed to him that the subject under discussion had been exhausted. "I'll amble over to the station and see Turner," he said. "Want to go over a few points with him."

"An hour from now, then," repeated the banker.

Harley nodded, and left the office.

After checking some details with Turner, he returned to the bank. Upon entering the president's office, he was surprised to see that Banker Landers had a visitor. Seated on the opposite side of the desk was Alison Lee.

The girl's chin went up and her lips compressed, but the banker apparently took no notice.

"Howdy, Wade," he greeted the Texan. "Alison, I want you to know Wade Harley, the nephew of your father's old friend, Andrew Harley."

"Mr. Harley and I have already met," the girl returned frigidly.

"That's fine, that's fine!" said the banker. "Glad to see you got along well together. By the way, I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast. Suppose we all drop over to the Occidental for a bite. Come along, now. You mustn't keep an old man waiting."

Before he realized just how it happened, Harley found himself walking down C street beside Alison Lee. They entered the restaurant and were ushered to a table. Wade and Alison seated themselves, but Landers did not immediately take a chair.

"There's a man I want to see," he said. "Go ahead and order and start eating. I'll be back in a few minutes."

With a sprightly nod he hurried out. Wade and Alison were left staring across the table at one another. Harley suddenly grinned down at her.

"Still thinking about that front wheel hub?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "That, and other things."

"You don't seem to think overwell of us Great Divide fellers," Harley remarked.

"Why should I?" she instantly countered. "All I've got from the Great Divide since Dad was killed is trouble. I wish he'd never bought a stage line. We were happy together on our little ranch. If he had stayed away from the stage-coach business he might be alive today."

"Yuh like the cow business?" Harley asked curiously.

"I love it," she declared, her eyes brightening. "Give me a good horse and a rope and I'm perfectly content."

"I was brought up on a spread, down in Texas," Harley observed. "Reckon the cow business is what I was really made for. Can't get it out of my blood."

Before either realized what had happened, the girl was listening, absorbed, while Harley regaled her with descriptions of ranching and its problems in Texas.

They had finished their meal and a full hour had passed when the old banker returned. They were so interested in their talk that they failed to note his arrival. His shrewd old eyes twinkled, and the smile that quirked the corners of his mouth was undoubtedly a smile of satisfaction.

There was no smile on the face of the man who accompanied him, though. Branch Bascomb's handsome features were expressionless, but his pale eyes seemed even colder than their usual wont as he regarded the absorbed pair. It was his voice, jovially cordial, however, that distracted them from each other.

"Sorry to bust things up, Alison," he said, "but we'll have to hustle if yuh're to get the shoppin' done yuh aimed to attend to."

THE girl came back to the present with a start. A tinge of color glowed in her cheeks.

"You're right, Branch," she replied. "I had forgotten all about it. We haven't much time."

She arose with lithe grace. Harley also stood up, towering over even tall Branch Bascomb.

"It has been pleasant, and I have learned things about ranching that I never knew before," Alison told Harley.

She held out a slender hand.

Wade Harley took the hand, and bowed over it with the courtly grace of his Virginia forbears. The color in Alison Lee's soft cheeks deepened. Branch Bascomb's thin lips tightened perceptibly, and the look he bent upon Harley's head was intensely speculative. The old banker chuckled under his mustache.

"Well, reckon I'll have to be going, too," he said, as Bascomb and Alison Lee left the restaurant together. "Drop in and see me any time you are of a mind to, son. Always be glad to see you."

Apparently he had forgotten all about whatever it was he intended discussing with the Texan, and Wade Harley, his mind filled with thoughts of the slender, blue-eyed girl who had sat across the table from him for more than an hour, also forgot. . . .

After three busy days in Virginia City, Wade Harley took out the Hangtown stage. He felt thoroughly in tune with the glory of the morning as the coach rolled around the vast curve of Mount Davidson.

He had experienced satisfaction that surprised him in writing the letter to old John Arbuckle and recounting modestly what he had accomplished since arriving in Nevada. He had suddenly realized that it was the good opinion of such men as Arbuckle, as Landers, the bank president, as George Hearst and William Stewart, that was really worth while, not the false, calculating and self-serving "good fellowship" of men like Matthew Dickson and his associates.

George Hearst, incidentally, was one of the number of passengers who rode the Great Divide coach out of Virginia City. The mine owner was headed back to Sacramento and had elected to make the trip via the Great Divide stage. Stewart had been detained at Carson City, the state capital, by matters relative to his extensive law practise.

The trip to the Tahoe station was uneventful. The east bound coach had already arrived and everything was running smoothly.

"Nope, no more trouble, so far," said Jim Slayton, the station agent. "But I got a feelin'," he added, "that somethin' is liable to bust loose soon. Yuh sort of set Branch Bascomb back on his heels with that Dead Man's Gulch business, and Branch don't take over kind to havin' somebody get the jump on him. I understand he's at their station over west of here. Got in this afternoon. Must have left Virginia City early."

The following morning was not far advanced when the stage entered Echo Canyon on the way to Hangtown. It was still shadowy in the narrow gorge, and the cool of night had not yet been dissipated. They crossed the suspension bridge Andy Harley had built, rounded the wide sweep of cliff and headed down the steep and winding slope.

They were some hundreds of yards down the sag when Harley suddenly twisted on

his seat. Behind them had sounded a prodigious banging and clattering and rumbling. Harley swore an astounded oath. A ponderous freight wagon drawn by four frantic mules was thundering down the slope. Its driver's seat was empty.

Curt Adams uttered a terrified yell.

"Tophet and blazes!" he bawled. "It's a runaway! The whip, feller, the whip! If that shebang catches up with me, we'll all be buzzard bait!"

Harley plucked the whip from its socket and sent the lash hissing over the backs of the mules. His voice rang out, urgent, compelling. The mules squealed response and went tearing down the mountainside at breakneck speed.

But faster still roared the terror behind, thundering and banging, hurtling down the slope like a meteor in a cloud of dust.

"Them mules back there are plumb crazy!" howled Adams, clutching the iron railing and hanging on for dear life. "How did that blasted thing get onto this trail? Where did it come from?" he yammered. "It ain't got no business here!"

"It's here, though," Harley said through set teeth as he swung his flying team around a dizzy curve.

He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw that the runaway was gaining. His mules were giving the best that was in them, but it wasn't enough. Slowly but surely the thundering wagon closed the distance. Harley could see the rolling eyes of the mules, their flaring nostrils. In his ears dinned the prodigious clattering and banging that accompanied the progress of the runaway.

DAZEDLY he wondered what could cause such a fearful racket. He took another turn and for a moment was certain the flying coach would leave the trail. The mules' irons sent out showers of sparks as they slid and slithered on the stones.

The tires rang like bells, the cramped front wheels screamed protest. The coach lurched and swayed appallingly and for a terrible instant he thought they were over the lip. Then the racing team straightened out and went scudding down a straight stretch of trail.

"Mebbe that infernal thing won't take that last turn," he hoped fervently.

The hope was almost instantly dissipated. The clanging and banging, which had momentarily been muffled by the protruding shoulder of cliff, resumed, louder and nearer. Harley played the lashes of his whip with a master hand. His mules responded with a final mighty effort.

"We'll never take that turn below the cleft!" Adams bawled. "It's good-by for us, feller. I wish I knew how to pray!"

Faster and faster flew the stage, but faster still boomed the huge freight wagon, gathering speed with every turn of its great wheels. The mules that drew it were now straining to their utmost to keep in front of the mighty weight. They could not stop if they wanted to.

A fleeting glance showed Harley that a gap of less than fifty yards now separated the two vehicles, and the distance was fast lessening. He turned to the front and gave his every attention to holding the coach to the trail. He strained his eyes ahead. There, only a few hundred yards distant, was the yawning gap in the side wall that marked the mouth of the crevice. And less than a score of feet beyond was an almost right-angled turn around which the flying coach could never hope to pass.

Wade Harley's lips set in a thin, hard line. His eyes, now the color of the icy waters of Lake Tahoe, narrowed. He braced his feet against the dashboard, dropped the whip and gripped the lines with both hands. Tense and quivering he waited, every nerve and muscle strained in anticipation of prodigious effort. The mouth of the cleft and the deadly curve rushed toward him with appalling speed. The hot breath of the runway mules were fanning the rear of the coach.

The east wall of the cleft flashed past. Harley gripped the lines, put forth every ounce of his great strength. The right sleeve of his shirt split from wrist to shoulder under the mighty bulge of his arm muscles. He threw his weight to the left, and back.

The lead mules swerved, floundered, all but lost their footing. Harley held them on their irons by a miracle of strength and dexterity. The inner wheels of the coach ground against the stones, the tires screaming protest. The clumsy equipage rocked and swayed.

Harley put forth his strength again. The mules swerved still more. They left the trail, their irons clashing and grating. The coach ground after them. They diagonaled into the cleft. The stage whisked off the trail and bounded over the stones. The run-away thundered past, with scant inches to spare.

As Harley twisted on the seat it reached the bend, shot off the trail into space, the wagon hurtling around and dragging the mules after it.

He had an awful glimpse of the mules trying to gallop back to the trail, their hoofs working in midair, their lean heads and terror-stricken faces, their long, writhing lips, white teeth and glaring eyes. Then they were gone. He listened tensely for the crash that would never be heard. No sound came back from the prodigious depths. Overhead a great condor-vulture planed on motionless, widespread wings.

"Adams, did yuh see it?" he exclaimed, his voice cold as steel grinding on ice. "Did yuh see it? Empty powder cans noosed to the front wheels with long strips of rawhide! Every time the wheels would turn, a can would fly over and smack a mule or bang on the ground at their heels! No wonder they went plumb loco!"

"She was set!" quavered the guard, raising a trembling hand to wipe away the sweat that streamed down his face. "Set to run us down and shove us off the cliff! The cussed low-lived snake-blooded sidewinders!"

The white-faced passengers were pouring from the coach. Last came old George Hearst, puffing unconcernedly on the cigar he had never allowed to go out during the wild ride down the mountain. He blew a ring of smoke, nodded to Wade Harley.

"A nice race, son," he remarked in a voice as steady as the hand he raised to his cigar. "Yep, yuh shore are high-grade at handlin' mules!"

CHAPTER XIV

"Dry Bones"

WHEN Harley had allowed the mules a breather, he loaded up his passengers, tooled the stage back onto the trail, and rolled on to Hangtown. They reached the mining town without further untoward incident. Harley found everything running smoothly.

"We ran into a bad storm yesterday on the eastbound trip, but the boys made it through all right," Westbrook told Harley. "Business is boomin'. They've struck it rich down in that infernal gulch. Pete Mossman shore knew what he was yelpin' about. More and more folks are headin' down that way. They're buildin' a town back up the gorge and yellin' for lumber and other materials."

"Did yuh have that talk with John Studebaker, as I suggested?" asked Harley.

"Yeah," said Westbrook. "John is busy fixin' up that batch of old freight wagons yuh sent down from Virginia City. We'll be ready to start 'em rollin' in a couple days. John is as good at wagons as he is on wheelbarrows. I figger he'll have his own wagon factory some day like he plans on, all right."

"How about Phil Armour," asked Harley.

"He is fixin' up that big covered wagon like yuh give him the notion. He's bringin' ice down from the mountains, packed in sawdust, and he allows it won't be any chore a-tall to run wagonloads of froze fresh meat down to the gulch. And the prices the boys will pay for that fresh meat! Phil is ready to hand us plenty of dinero to do the freightin' for him. He opines you had better give up stage coachin' and go into the meat business with him."

Westbrook was, in fact, bubbling over with news, but his face became grave when Harley recounted the near disaster in Echo Canyon.

"Ain't there anythin' Branch Bascomb won't do!" he exploded when the tale was finished. "That hellion won't stop at nothin'. He's out to do for yuh, boss. Yuh want to keep yore eyes open."

"He acts friendly enough whenever I run into him," Harley protested. "After all, we haven't any proof that Bascomb and the Virginia and Western had anything to do with it."

"I'd like to know who else!" scoffed Westbrook. "The outlaws that hang out in the hills? What would they gain by runnin' the coach off the cliff? There's no way to get down into that canyon, and even if there was, anythin' droppin' from the trail would be smashed to splinters. Them jiggers don't go makin' trouble for nothin'. Bascomb and the Virginia and Western are the only ones that stand to profit by somethin' happenin' to you."

"Seems plumb loco that he would go to the extent of mass murder just to gain a business advantage," Harley remarked.

Westbrook gave the Texan a curious glance.

"Mebbe he's after somethin' more important to him than a business advantage," the agent said softly.

"What yuh mean by that?" Harley demanded.

Westbrook shrugged. He answered the question obliquely.

"Alison Lee is a mighty fine gal," he said,

Harley stared at the agent, opened his lips to speak, and changed the subject.

"How do chances look for the railroad mail and express contracts?" he asked.

"Not so good," Westbrook admitted ruefully. "They've beat our time from Tahoe to Hangtown three times in the past week."

"How come?" Harley wanted to know.

"Drivers!" Westbrook growled. "That redheaded spitfire and Bascomb have been takin' turns drivin' their coaches from their Tahoe station to Hangtown. Aside from yoreself, we ain't got a whip cracker what can touch either one of 'em. They shore have been makin' them coaches roll. That gal is a wonder with the whip, and Bascomb is purty nigh as good. He's a cruel driver and brings his mules in lookin' like them ring-streaked and striped cows I once heard a preacher read about from the Bible. They shore do have whip marks a-plenty on 'em.

"The gal is different. She's one of them folks what have a way with mules and hosses. She's like yoreself—never touches their hides with a lash. Gets results by talkin' to 'em and winnin' their confidence. Drivers like that are few and far between. I can't help admirin' her, but it shore don't do us any good.

"A little more like what's happened durin' the past week and there ain't much doubt as to who'll get them contracts. It's the run from Tahoe down here that counts. From Virginia City to Tahoe don't matter so much, seein' as it's a all night layover at Tahoe anyhow, for both outfits."

"If we could only keep the coaches rollin' right on after dark and not make a lay-over at Tahoe," Harley said musingly. "What then?"

WESTBROOK scoffed at the idea.

"Come through the lower end of Echo Canyon and over the mountaintop trail in the dark!" he jeered. "There wouldn't be anythin' left of the shebang but some splinters down in the canyons. We're just lucky that the Virginia and Western trail is as bad as ours west of Tahoe, so they have to lay over, too."

"We could make the east half of Echo Canyon while there's still daylight," Harley remarked.

"Uh-huh, and night would catch yuh about halfway through," Westbrook replied. "It gets dark early down in that hole. Nope, boss, it wouldn't work. A feller would be takin' chances ridin' that trail by hossback, after dark. Takin' a coach through would just mean bustin' up a dull day for the undertaker, if he could locate anythin' hefty enough to make a funeral out of."

Harley nodded agreement, but his eyes were thoughtful.

Westbrook peered out the window.

"Here come the coaches from Dead Man's Gulch," he exclaimed. "They're loaded to the roofs."

With a prodigious cracking of whips, jingling of harness and rumbling of wheels, the three great vehicles roared up to the station and disgorged a throng of dusty, travel-stained, but jubilant miners in to file locations and celebrate. Swearing drivers, whooping hostlers, and squealing mules created a pandemonium that resembled a riot getting under way.

Before the mules were unhitched, Harley stepped from the station.

"Drive 'em over to the lot behind Studebaker's shop," he directed. "I've a notion about strengthenin' the thoroughbraces. Want to see if John will figger it practicable."

"They'll need strengthenin'," rumbled Westbrook, "with the loads they're packin' now-days. If we had a few more drivers like you, boss, I'd favor eight mules instead of six. That drag across the desert and into the gulch is somethin'!"

John Studebaker, the master wagon builder, expressed admiration of Harley's idea and at once proceeded to put it into effect. His group of assistants would toil through the hours of darkness and have the coaches ready for the trip to Dead Man's Gulch on schedule.

"The wagons will all be ready in a couple more days," he told Harley. "Yuh can put two of 'em on the job in the mornin', if yuh're a-mind to. Armour's meat wagon will be ready tomorrow, too. Who's goin' to take that one out the first trip? She'll need eight or ten mules to pull her, and handlin' her won't be an easy chore."

"Reckon I'll make the first trip," Harley replied laconically. "I want to see how that

meat holds up on the trip. It's a new notion, yuh know."

"It'll work," Studebaker declared confidentially. "What Phil Armour don't know about handlin' meat just isn't, I guess. He's all het up about yore idea, and I reckon the boys over to the gulch will be, too. They don't often get meat like that at an outlying camp. Steers drove there from the range are just skin and bones and dried up gristle when they're ready for slaughterin', and the ranchers don't take kind to the notion, either. They say it don't pay 'em to drive small batches that away. . . ."

Harley drove the great meat wagon into the gulch the following evening, after a grueling trip that taxed his driving abilities to the utmost. He found "Dry Bones", so named by a wit with a grim sense of humor, already a roaring camp. There were clusters of tents, rough shacks, lean-tos. Lanterns had been hung on poles to provide street lighting, walk-ways had been leveled off.

He was not surprised to find a saloon already set up and doing a roaring business. He was surprised, however, when he saw, leaning against the far end of the roughly constructed bar and wearing the air of a proprietor, none other than Branch Bascomb.

Bascomb greeted him cordially enough.

"Yuh sort of got the jump on me with the stage line down here," he admitted frankly, "but there's other business opportunities yuh haven't tied onto. This new place of mine is paydirt for fair."

"Glad to see yuh're doin' well," Harley replied, resolved not to be outdone by the other in politeness. "But I'm not interested in the saloon business. Saloons never got me anything but trouble."

Bascomb's handsome face became grim. "They've got me trouble, too, more'n once," he replied, "but I always managed to make money out of 'em. I'll make money here, all right, but I look for trouble, too. It's a wild bunch down here."

HARLEY agreed. It was a wild bunch, all right, but a grand one.

Men! Clear-eyed, deep-chested, strong and vigorous. Booted, bearded, bristling with deadly weapons, they swaggered among the tents and shacks, lustly with life, brimful of energy, typical of California and the roaring days of gold. The very pick of the world's glorious ones.

Comfort, the easy life was not for them. They were out to wrest fortune from the granite breast of the earth, to gamble life and limb against the dumb, terrible forces of nature. Neither heat nor thirst nor hunger nor danger would stay them. They might be sinners, but they were splendid sinners, and they had positive, robust virtues to offset their vices.

They were representative of the most gallant host that ever trooped down the startled solitudes of an unpeopled land. They were Jason, Coronado, Esau, Ulysses and Reuben. Seekers after the Golden Fleece, the fabulous Seven Cities, Norembega, El Dorado. They were empire builders who didn't know it and didn't care. Today was theirs! Yesterday was forgotten. Tomorrow still unborn.

They laughed at the desert, roared to the stars, and claimed the deathly wastelands for their own. Before they finished with it, the desert would blossom like a rose, the wasteland become a garden. They would salt both blue with their bones, but on such a grim foundation would be builded a land of peace and plenty that future generations would enjoy.

They were the pioneers, the conquerors of the never-never country, the outstanding giants of an age of giants. Wade Harley thought it a fine thing to be one of their number.

The tall Texan was a subject of discussion by the groups of miners. He was pointed out as the man who had opened up the gulch.

"Another Ben Holliday, that's what he was," declared one enthusiast, comparing Harley to the great Overland Stage Company's famous general manager. "I tell yuh that young feller is up and comin'. He's a man, too, and don't yuh forget it. Betcha he can lick any three men in this camp."

"Could be," another agreed with reservations, "that is if yuh don't figger Branch Bascomb as one of the three. Bascomb is a salty hombre, too, and don't yuh forget it."

"I'll back Harley to the bottom of my poke," the first speaker countered stoutly. "He's the bully boy with the glass eye for me."

"Harley has somethin' Bascomb lacks," said old Ballou, the grizzled patriarch of the camp.

"What's that, Pop?"

"A clear, straight bright eye that looks out of a clean heart," replied the old-timer. "Wade Harley is a man clean through to his

liver. He's the kind of feller I'd want with me in a cave-in down on a lower level."

"Uh-huh, he's a man to ride the river with."

A brawny ex-cowboy nodded, paying Harley the finest compliment the rangeland can give.

CHAPTER XV

Drygulched

DISTASTEFULLY, Harley soon learned that the clean-limbed miners did not make up the whole of the population. The inevitable camp followers were already moving in. Games had been set up in Bascomb's saloon, and back of the tables sat steel-nerved, waxen-faced card sharps with cold eyes and uncannily dextrous fingers. Harley watched the play for a while, his black brows drawing together in a frown of disapproval.

"Crooked as sin!" he muttered to himself. "But those dealers and wheel men are almighty smart. It would take an expert to catch 'em."

His lips tightened as he realized that his association with Matthew Dickson had made him, Harley, something of an "expert".

"If these jiggers hereabouts ever do catch one of 'em at a flim-flammin', there's liable to be a hangin' or two," he told himself grimly.

As he left the saloon, Branch Bascomb's cold eyes followed his progress, in them a speculative gleam. He nodded to a couple of quiet, watchful individuals lounging nearby. The pair nodded back, evidently with complete understanding.

To Harley's intense satisfaction, the wagonload of meat, well-iced and covered with tarpaulins, withstood the rigors of the trip across the blazing hills and the desert and was in prime condition. The miners received it with enthusiasm and demanded a steady supply.

"Beef and whisky, that's what yuh need to dig gold on," reclared Pete Mossman, in whose shack Harley had elected to spend the night.

"Pete sort of speaks with authority nowdays," chuckled his partner, John Evers. "Yuh see, the boys elected Pete mayor of the town the other day. It's quite a distinction, only it don't carry no pay."

"Nothin' to do, either, so far," Mossman said, and grinned.

"There's liable to be, though," Evers predicted. "This camp is buildin' up, and we're gettin' in some ornery characters, or I'm a heap mistook. We're liable to need a hangin' try before long."

Harley was something of the same opinion as he recalled what was going on in Branch Bascomb's saloon. For a long time that night he lay awake, listening to the roar of the camp and to the occasional crack and rumble of a large boulder bounding down the slope below the mouth of the bowl. Mossman told him that already several men had narrowly escaped death from falling rocks.

"Wish there was some way to get 'em all down at one time," the miner said. "It would be considerable of a chore, diggin' out from under, but I've a notion it would pay in the end. If there ever is a big slip up there, somebody is mighty liable to get hurt."

Which last, Harley felt, was a fine example of understatement.

At daybreak, Harley headed back to Hangtown with the big meat wagon. He promised the miners another load as soon as possible. Although it was yet hardly light, many were already at work, picking and shoveling and washing the gravel from the broad belt below the ominous mountain of shattered stone. They paused to wave greetings as the big wagon lurched along behind the toiling mules.

It was still comparatively cool in the gulch and the air was free from dust. But nevertheless Harley was glad to win free of the sinister gorge and onto the broad expanse of the desert that shimmered like a sea of molten gold in the first rays of sunlight.

On the crest of the tall ridge east of the desert he pulled to a halt and stared back the way he had come. The vast reaches of sand were already changing from gold to lifeless gray. Here and there spouts and whirls of dust spurted up as the dawn wind freshened. The mouth of Dead Man's Gulch showed dark and menacing, untouched as yet by the flood of morning light.

Harley shook his head and sent the mules down the eastern slope at a fast clip.

For several miles the trail ran across roll-

ing land, then it edged along a brush-covered slope that rose sharply on the left, the sun beating upon it in shimmering waves. Harley, glancing up the long rise, suddenly saw movement amid the brush, accompanied by a flash as of shifted metal reflecting the light.

He straightened up abruptly, saw a whitish puff spurt from the brush. But before the sharp, metallic clang of the report reached his ears, he whirled sideward in the high seat and pitched over the railing to the ground to lie motionless, his body half-screened by a clump of low growth.

Half-stunned by the fall, his head ringing from the blow of the slug that had grazed his skull, the Texan lay with a clammy black fog swirling in his numb brain. Dimly he realized the deadly danger of the slightest move that would tell the undoubtedly watching drygulchers that there was still life in his body.

He had landed on his left side and facing the silent slope. By a prodigious effort of the will he fought off the numbing blackness that threatened to drag him down into complete unconsciousness, and the deadly nausea that accompanied it. By degrees his mind came back to normal, his fogged sight cleared. Through half-closed lids he stared up the slope that showed no sign of life.

FOR long minutes he lay tensely rigid, his right hand inches from the black butt of the long Colt snugged in the holster against his right thigh. And nothing happened. The mules had jogged along a few yards and come to a halt. Now they were contentedly browsing on the tops of the low growth that lined the trail.

Suddenly the brush a few hundred yards up the slope was agitated. An instant later a man stepped cautiously into view. He was followed by a second man. They stood peering down the sag. Then they began to move slowly toward the trail. As the drew near, Harley saw that they carried rifles ready.

A few yards short of the trail they paused, peering with outthrust necks.

"Reckon he's done for, all right," one of them said in a rumbling voice.

The other nodded. "Looks that way, but better give him another slug to make shore. If we slip up on this chore, the boss will raise ructions."

He half raised his rifle as he spoke.

Wade Harley's right hand flickered down and up. He shot from the hip. The foremost man gave a queer coughing grunt and pitched forward onto his face. His companion, with a yell of terror, flung up his rifle and fired wildly. But even as he pressed trigger, Harley's second bullet took him squarely between his staring eyes. He crumpled up like a sack of old clothes. His rifle clattered down the slope.

Harley bounded to his feet, his second gun streaking from its holster. Tense, ready, he stood with his thumbs hooked over the cocked hammers, his eyes never leaving the sprawling forms amid the brush. They lay without sound or movement.

He advanced slowly toward them, still wachful, his glance flickering from time to time up the slope, which stretched silent and lifeless in the hot blaze of the sun. In a moment he stood beside the two drygulchers, staring down at them, his face as bleak as chiseled granite. He holstered one gun, mechanically ejected the spent shells from the other, and replaced them with fresh cartridges.

"Well, this makes three," he muttered, recalling the dead man sprawled in the dust of Hangtown's Main Street. "I never figgered to be a killer, but it looks like I'm headin' that way, and I don't like it!"

With a last glance at the dead drygulchers, he turned and walked slowly to the wagon. In his ears rang the voice of Westbrook, the Hangtown agent:

"Branch Bascomb is out to do for yuh! He won't stop at nothin'!"

"But there's still no proof that Bascomb is back of all this," Harley muttered to himself as he climbed stiffly to the driver's seat and started the mules.

Full dark had descended when Harley, with a dull pain pounding in his head and every bone in his body aching, pulled up before the Great Divide station. Westbrook was awaiting him and with disquieting news.

"That gal brought her coach in a full hour ahead of ours today," he announced. "Her mail and express load made connections with the Sacramento stage. Ours didn't. We'll have to hold over until tomorrer. A little more of this and that railroad contract is a goner. The railroad is checkin' every trip. What's the matter with yore head, boss? Yuh got a nice skinned place just below yore hair."

Harley told him of the drygulching, in terse sentences. Westbrook swore luridly.

"I told yuh Branch Bascomb is out to get yuh," he repeated. "So he's gone into the saloon business? He'll have a prime nest of rattlesnakes hangin' around him down there. Boss, I figger yuh'd better stay away from Dead Man's Gulch."

"I will, for a few days, Harley replied. "I'm headin' for Virginia City in the mornin' —want to get my hoss. I don't know how long I'll be gone. You carry on till I get back. Keep the meat wagon movin'. Curly can handle the team. He's a dependable man. Tell him to leave likker alone at Dead Man's Gulch and stay out of trouble.

"I've a notion, too, yuh'd better put a guard on that wagon. Use Adams. He's a cool proposition. Put another man on the Virginia City stage. See that Studebaker gets those wagons ready as soon as possible, and start 'em rollin'. The boys need lumber mighty bad down there, and more tools. *Adios.* . . ."

Harley reached Virginia City without mishap. He went over a multitude of details with Turner. He found Rojo in prime condition but impatient of his forced inactivity.

Mid-morning of the day after his arrival in Virginia City found the Texan riding west on the Hangtown trail. He laid over at the Tahoe station, saddled up at daybreak the following morning and, his saddle-bags packed with food, his blanket-roll strapped behind the cantle, rode westward again.

ECHO CANYON was still gloomy with the shades of early morning when he turned into the cleft that split the south wall, the scene of the near disaster with the runaway freight wagon. He rounded the shoulder of cliff and the side canyon, and its floor smooth and level, its sides towering walls of sheer rock stretched before him.

Mile after mile he rode. The canyon floor remained almost level, but as he progressed the side walls increased in height until they soared a full three thousand feet above his head. A narrow strip of blue sky lay on their lofty crests and the gloom of the narrow cleft was the gloom of a shuttered room.

A few more miles and the canyon floor began to slope gently downward, the height of the walls becoming even greater. He passed a large spring that gushed from under a cliff and rode beside the stream that flowed down the gentle slope. Harley was pleased to see that the canyon ran almost due west, the southward veering being slight.

"She's a slash through the mountains," he told himself exultantly. "Looks like she's made to order. Adams said Uncle Andy told him she was a box. That's all I've got to worry about, but this crik makes things look better. The water has to go somewheres. It sort of bolsters up my hunch. All I need now is one little bit of luck."

A few more miles and he saw that Adams had been right. The canyon was a box. A gigantic wall of seamed and ledge rock rose sheer to the far-off sky, blocking the western end of the canyon. With a plainsman's uncanny sense of distance and direction, Harley was certain that beyond the rock wall lay the downward slope of the hills and California.

Anxiously he traced the course of the stream. It flowed straight to the end wall and vanished into an opening, a score of feet wide and perhaps four feet high. Above the shallow cleft reared the mighty, unclimbable wall of stone.

Harley dismounted, dropped Rojo's reins to the ground and studied the opening and the wall of rock. The cliff was of porous limestone, as were the adjoining side walls. The whole formation was geologically similar to many he had observed in southwest Texas. It was this petrological similarity upon which his hunch was based.

"And I'm willin' to bet that inside that cliff is just the same as I saw more'n once down in Texas. It's a wonder Uncle Andy didn't catch on. But, after all, he wasn't an engineer, never made an intensive study of petrology—the science of rocks and their formation—as I happened to. The subject always interested me and I went rather deeper into it than most. Well, here goes to find out."

Along the side walls of the canyon grew a straggle of dwarf pines. Harley browsed about among them until he found a fragment of resinous wood that would make a good torch. He lighted it, stepped into the shallow waters of the stream, which was little more than ankle deep and, bending almost double, shuffled under the low arch of rock.

As he scrambled along over the water-worn stones of the stream bed, the light behind him grew dimmer. The glare of his torch flickered on the dense arch of rock hanging directly over his head. The walls echoed back hollowly the murmur of the stream.

For perhaps ten yards he crouched pain-

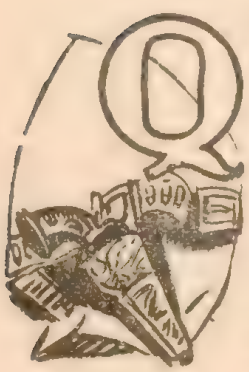
fully along, unable to raise his head. Then abruptly the arch of rock shelved upward. A few more yards and he found himself in a cavern or natural tunnel thirty feet or more in width. Holding his torch aloft, he could just make out the roof a full twenty feet above his head.

Both sides and walls were worn perfectly smooth, apparently by the action of water. The stream gurgled along the left wall. The floor was level, with a slightly downward slope and sparsely strewn with water worn stones.

"Just as I figgered!" the Texan exulted. "Once upon a time, mebbe hundreds of thousands of years back, when things were different hereabouts, a heap more water ran through here than is here now. That's what made the cave in the first place, the chances are, and the water widened and deepened it. Then things changed and the big water didn't run here any more. Mebbe there was a subsidence that lowered the cliff through which the entrance runs. Mebbe slowly drippin' water built down the rock as a stalactite is formed. Now if this hole just keeps on like it's started, everything will be fine!"

CHAPTER XVI

Trail Builders



QUICKLY Wade Harley retraced his steps to the outer air. He got the rig off Rojo and carefully concealed it under a heap of brush. The provisions from the saddlebags and his blanket he made into a pack which he strapped to his back. Then he procured an armful of torches from the pine growth.

"You take it easy now, feller, and don't go maverickin' off somewheres," he old the sorrel, who was already contentedly cropping the grass that grew along the banks of the stream. "Don't know how long I'll be gone, but I'll be back for yuh. Be seein' yuh."

Lighting a torch, he reentered the cleft under the cliff, shuffled along until he could stand erect, then set out along the tunnel at a good pace, watchful for possible pitfalls.

He encountered none, however, and made good progress along the burrow, which was fairly straight. The steady slope of the floor continued. The scattering of stones were not plentiful enough to cause him much difficulty.

"Easy to move and shove over to the sides," he mused. "This thing is shore made to order, that is, if it just leads to the outside and don't take a notion to drop down into the ground somewheres."

For fully two miles he stumbled along through the black dark, with only the cheerful murmur of the stream and the hollow echo of his footsteps to break the silence. Then his eyes were gladdened by a pinpoint of light ahead. He hurried toward it and was gratified to see it steadily increase in size.

A few more minutes and he stood at the far mouth of the cave. Ahead stretched a gorge similar to the one that led to the inner cave mouth. A gentle slope led down to its floor. The side walls were high, but hardly so towering as those of the canyon from which he entered the cave. Laying the remainder of his torches aside, he tightened the straps of his pack and set out westward through the gorge.

Hour after hour he tramped, narrowly scanning the terrain he traversed, calculating, estimating, nodding his head with satisfaction from time to time.

"Some work to be done, but not too much," he told himself. "Yes suh, a trail through here is not at all impractical. If this keeps up, we're all set."

Nightfall found him still in the shadowy ravine, but many miles from his starting point. He made camp, cooked some supper and slept till daylight under an overhang of rock. Morning found him tramping westward once more.

The sun was high in the heavens when at last the rock walls fell away and Wade Harley found himself standing at the crest of a long slope and gazing over rolling land that extended westward as far as his eyes could reach. As he gazed, he was filled with a feeling of intense satisfaction.

The way through the hills was practicable and there were no such difficulties and dangers as those attendant to old Andy Harley's route through Echo Canyon. After a rest and a bite to eat, Wade Harley turned and began the long tramp back to the cave and the cleft that led to Echo Canyon.

Four days later, two great freight wagons rumbled westward out of Virginia City, loaded with tools, supplies and blasting powder. Wade Harley sat on the driver's

seat of the foremost wagon.

Perched on the loads were half a dozen brawny hard-rock men, calmly smoking their dudeens, conversing together in low tones. Tethered to the tail gate, Rojo trotted after the rear wagon.

They spent the night at the Tahoe station and with the first light rumbled westward again. Before the cliff that boxed the side canyon, the wagons drew to a halt. The rock men got down and inspected the project.

"Nothin' to it," the powder man reported at length. "We'll knock a way through this rock in a couple days. All right, you tarriers, break out them drills and get 'em goin'. Drivin' steel, boys! Drivin' steel!"

Soon the cheerful clink of hammer faces on drill heads resounded between the rock walls as the hammer men swung their ponderous sledges in rhythm with the sprightly chant of the drill turners:

Way down ya-a-ander! Huh!
White oak timber-r-r-r-r! Huh!

Wade Harley watched complacently for a while as the drills bit into the stone. Then he busied himself with setting up the camp for the night.

Just at sunset, the boom of the first blasts rocked the cliffs.

The powder man was not far off in his estimate. On the morning of the third day, the wagons rolled through a wide and high arched opening that replaced the shallow fissure in the cliff wall.

BY THE light of lanterns and flares, the trail builders cleared away the boulders that strewed the floor of the cave. They did a little grading down the slope and proceeded on through the lower ravine, cutting brush, clearing away obstructions until they reached the open ground beyond the gorge mouth.

For two weeks they graded, embanked, felled timber and built bridges across gulleys. Harley shot deer and grouse and caught fish to augment their food supply. At night they sat around the campfire and smoked and yarned.

"Reminds me of the good old days when me and Gineral Dodge was buildin' the Union Pacific across Colorado," said the powder man.

"You and Gineral Dodge!" scoffed a companion. "Clancy, the gineral didn't know yez was alive."

"The divil he didn't!" replied Clancy. "Why, one day he was settin' his horse not twenty yards off when I cut a fuse a mite short and the blast let go sooner than expected. It blowed the gineral's hat clean off his head and spattered him with mud. 'Clancy,' sez the gineral, 'Clancy, if we wuz still in the army I'd have yez shot!' Oh, yis, the gineral knowed I was alive, and right then I figger he would have been just as plazed if I wasn't!"

Sixteen days out from Echo Canyon, Wade Harley pulled the lead wagon to a halt and pointed toward a dark smudge lying along the western skyline.

"Hangtown!" he told his companions. "Boys, we did it!"

"And there's the Overland Trail right ahead!" Clancy whooped at few minutes later. "Pow-w-wder River!"

His companions joined in the rousing cheer as the wagons rolled onto the broad Overland and headed for the mining town and the Great Divide station.

The following week the Great Divide coaches in Virginia City bore glaring signs that read:

THROUGH RUN TO HANGTOWN.
SUPPER AT LAKE TAHOE,
BREAKFAST AT HANGTOWN.
NO NIGHT LAYOVER AT TAHOE.
SAVE TWELVE HOURS TRAVEL TIME.

"Looks like we've got them contracts hawgtied now!" Westbrook exulted when Harley drove the first through stage to the Great Divide's Hangtown station. The Virginia and Western can't beat our time even if they dared risk a night run, which they won't. There's only one catch in it that I can figger. There's nothin' to keep them from usin 'our new trail to run competition, and I wouldn't put it past Branch Bascomb to do just that. The whole line is in California, yuh know, and not protected like our route in Nevada."

"I've thought of that," Harley replied, "and I think I know what to do about it. I'm ridin' to Sacramento City, the capital, tomorrow."

Harley thought the Crescent City, in its setting of eternal summer, a very pleasant place. Everywhere there were flowers, banks and drifts of flowers. The warm air was melodious with the songs of birds. The river was a flashing sheet of silver in the brilliant sunshine.

And yet, Harley knew, as he rode along P

Street, that only a few hours' ride distant was the gleaming surface of frozen Donner Lake, seven thousand feet above the lush and verdant valley, when there were snow banks fifteen feet deep, where grandly towering mountain peaks lifted their frosty crags and glittering white wreaths ten thousand feet above the level of the sea.

From their heights, the valley, with its fruitful fields, its silver streams, and the mellow haze of its sunshine would be a glimpse of a fantastic fairyland seen through a setting of savage crags and gloom-enshrouded cliffs. Harley wondered if the world could show another like spectacle.

He turned down J Street and into a scene of roistering pandemonium equal to Hangtown at its wildest. In every block, gambling houses were in full blast. There was a din and clatter of music, of the clinking of great piles of gold pieces, of the thuds of the pokes of gold-dust as reckless miners in from the hills threw them upon the tables, ready to bet a hundred ounces on the turn of a card.

"California!" he chuckled. "She shore is in a class by herself!"

Harley had little difficulty locating old George Hearst. The mine owner greeted him with undoubted warmth. He chuckled long and loud over Harley's story as he stated his case, and slapped his thigh with his huge hand.

"Son," he exclaimed, "yuh're up-and-comin'! Yore kind is the sort of men we need in this country, to make it grow and become what it should be. I'll be glad to give yuh a hand any time. I figger I can fix this business for yuh. Come on, we'll go up to the Statehouse and see the governor."

TOGETHER they repaired to the Capitol building with its classic portico and its graceful dome in a setting of sub-tropical growth of vivid green and flaming color. The governor, a quiet, pleasant-faced and affable man, received them cordially, greeting Hearst with the familiarity of an old friend. He listened attentively as Harley's problem was set before him.

"It appears to be a legitimate enterprise, and Harley is entitled to protection," he told George Hearst when the story was finished. "We'll take care of it. The legislature is in session right now. We'll rush the franchise through for him."

Hearst slapped the younger man on the back as they left the governor's office.

"Reckon that'll take care of yuh, son," he said. "Now yore new trail is goin' to be a toll road and yuh can charge anybody wantin' to use it plenty. Yep, I reckon that sets yuh up all right. . . ."

In the course of his ride back to Hangtown, Harley pulled up and gazed at the Bradded ranchhouse set on its hilltop amid its spreading grove of oaks. It was like the home of his dreams, the kind of place for which he had always longed.

"Oh, well," he told Rojo. "Mebbe we'll be able to save enough money to buy it some day."

He chuckled whimsically as he ran his eyes over the broad acres of rich land, and computed the Great Divide's average earnings.

"Be a nice place to sit back and watch my whiskers turn white," he told the golden horse, and rode on to Hangtown.

Harley received a letter the following week from John Arbuckle, the executor of his uncle's estate. Arbuckle wrote:

> Matthew Dickson is dead, No, you didn't do for him. You just plugged him through the shoulder. He got into a row with one of his dealers, and the dealer used a knife. He isn't missed.
>
> Glad to hear you are doing well, and hope you will do better. I'll be in Virginia City in time for the final reading of your uncle's will. Expect to see you there.

"Didn't tell me a thing," Harley mused. "Well, I'm almighty glad to learn I didn't cash in Matt. Reckon he had a killin' comin', but just the same it's nice to know I wasn't responsible for it. Makes me feel a sight better."

CHAPTER XVII

Rim-Rock Rider

EARNESTLY busy days and weeks followed. The news of the rich strike in Dead Man's Gulch spread far and wide. Gold-seekers poured in from all over the state, from Nevada, from Utah and Colorado. The Great Divide did a roaring business. The freighting line was set in operation and the wagons rumbled out of Hangtown with capacity

loads. The hoped-for railroad contract was assured.

"Funny about the Virginia and Western," Westbrook chuckled. "We've boomed business for them, too. They can't handle all the business they get out of Virginia City, no more than we can. I understand Bascomb has ordered more coaches."

"Glad to hear it," Harley returned. "As I told Bascomb once, the country is plenty big enough and plenty rich enough for everybody. I'm just as pleased as he is to know their line is doin' well."

Westbrook shot his employer a shrewd glance.

"I heard that Bascomb and Jackson Lee's daughter had considerable of a row the other day," he remarked.

"What about?" Harley asked, interested.

"It was over his business down in Dead Man's Gulch, I understand," Westbrook replied. "Seems she don't exactly approve of what Bascomb is doin' down there."

"Don't approve of the likker business?"

"I reckon women generally don't over fancy the likker business," said the agent. "But it's a legitimate business, 'specially in a country like this, and they put up with it. Nope, I don't figger it was over Bascomb gettin' into the likker business. I've a prime notion Bascomb is mixed up in some off-color practises in that place of his.

"That gulch is boomin'. The town is twice as big now as when you were down there. A couple more places has opened up. I hear Pete Mossman is organizin' a vigilante committee. I hear, too, that Bascomb has a wonderful set of scalawags workin' in his place, which is the biggest there. He's got games goin' and he's brung in some dance floor gals.

"Makin' money hand over fist, I reckon, and I reckon, too, he ain't at all particular how he makes it. I've a notion him and the gal is liable to bust up soon as she comes of age and gets control of her property—which ain't far off now. I don't figger she's goin' to marry Bascomb after all, like everybody used to figger she would."

He shot another shrewd glance at Harley. The Texan was frowning.

"I've a notion the sooner she does break off with him, no matter for what reason, the better it will be for her," Westbrook added. "And, boss, don't forget what I told yuh about goin' to Dead Man's Gulch. Bascomb has a lot in influence down there, and he's buildin' up an oganization. Bet yuh before he's finished, the Owls of Hangtown and the hounds of Frisco will be small potaters to the gang he gets together. He's a salty proposition, and he's got snake blood or I'm a heap mistook."

"It looks that way," Harley admitted thoughtfully. "But I've a notion Mossman and his boys will be able to handle the situation. They don't strike me as the sort to overlook many bets."

Harley had a sample of Pete Mossman's sagacity the following day. The big miner rode up to the station on his rat-tailed mule, jovial and cheerful, but with important matters to discuss.

"We've been havin' some trouble down to the gulch," he informed the Texan. "Several of the boys have been robbed, and a couple of 'em bad hurt. It's gettin' so it ain't safe for a man to have a lot of dust and nuggets in his cabin. We've decided to do somethin' about it.

"The boys have got together and figgered that the best place for their dust is here in the Hangtown bank. We've got a shipment together—guarded in my cabin—a hundred thousand dollars and more worth of dust. We want the stage to pack it to Hangtown for us."

Harley looked thoughtful, and so did Westbrook.

"We haven't got insurance to cover anything like that," the agent observed. "Lose a shipment of that size and it would just about bust the company. Of course we could take it with the provision that the line can't be held liable for anything that might happen."

"I don't aim to do business that way," Harley interrupted. "If we agree to handle the shipment, we'll agree to be responsible and charge accordingly."

Westbrook nodded, apparently not the least surrpised at his employers' attitude.

"The question," Harley resumed, " is how to handle it safely."

"We'll keep it a dead secret when the shipment goes out," said Mossman. "We can keep it under cover and mebbe fool any rapscallions who might have notions about other men's gold."

"That's important," Harley agreed, "but things like that have a habit of leakin' out, no matter haw careful yuh are. We have to take that point into consideration and guard against it."

FOR some minutes he sat smoking thoughtfully. His companion watched him expectantly. Finally Harley stood up abruptly, stretching his long arms above his head. He had evidently arrived at a decision.

"We'll handle the shipment," he told Mossman. "Westbrook, as soon as Number Four coach gets in, shove it over to Studebaker's shop. It should be here within the hour. Let's see, this is Wednesday. We'll take the shipment out Saturday, Pete. Keep the time under yore hat, and have the stuff ready to ship into the coach Friday night."

The great back doors of John Studebaker's shop were swung open and the coach was run inside. Both back and front doors were closed and barred. Following Harley's suggestions, the future master designer of the famous Studebaker wagon and "horseless carriage" went to work with a corps of trusted assistants.

Surprising things were done to Number Four coach. First the upholstering was ripped out and carefully laid aside. When it was replaced, underneath were sheets of steel that extended from the floor to the window ledges. Then Studebaker went to work on the driver's seat. Innocent appearing changes were made. The back of the seat was heightened and upholstered, apparently for the comfort of the driver, but under the upholstering were also sheets of steel.

The side railings were replaced by equally innocent-appearing upholstered buffers. The dashboard was heightened somewhat, the section of the roof upon which the driver's feet rested was sunk more than a foot. When all was done, the driver and the guard were almost hidden from view. It was possible for them to crouch behind the dashboard and be almost completely shielded by bullet-resisting steel.

And, through the genius of the wagon builder, the whole appearance of the coach was deceptive. His camouflage of upholstery and cunningly designed lines was such that the changes in the design of the coach would hardly be noticed by the casual observer who knew nothing of coach design.

"Have Curly drive out of Hangtown," Harley told Westbrook, "and tell him to take his time so that he'll reach the gulch right after dark. He'll put out at daybreak the following morning, before it gets really light. And tell him to keep his eyes skinned every minute. Adams will ride guard. And at the last minute, pull Haines off Number Three coach and put him inside Number Four with his shotgun and rifle for the trip from the gulch to Hangtown.

"Be sure the new locks Studebaker put on the doors are fastened securely. The key doesn't leave the gulch. We have a duplicate here in Hangtown. No passengers on Number Four for the return trip. Load her up with all the express and mail, on top of the gold. She'll pull out earlier than the other two coaches. Reckon that's all. The rest is up to you, Pete."

"Yuh're not goin' to ride the coach on the trip?" Mossman asked curiously.

Harley smiled slightly. "No," he replied. "I'm not going to ride—the coach."

The dawn was just breaking in scarlet and gold when Number Four coach rolled out of the gulch mining town, Dry Bones. Curley, Raw-boned, gangling and swarthy, sat on the driver's seat, his glittering black eyes shooting in all directions. Beside him sat the taciturn Adams, shotgun across his knees, rifle leaning beside his left leg.

Inside the coach, completely out of sight, crouched "Rimrock" Raines, a grizzled old Indian fighter who usually rode the seat of Number Three coach. Raines was armed with rifle, revolver and shotgun. He had entered the coach during the dark hours, immediately after the gold shipment, weighted down with mail and express matter, had been stowed in place.

Out of the dark mouth of the gulch rolled the stage. It crossed the desert in the strengthening light of morning, climbed the long slope and rumbled down the opposite sag. Drivers and guards continually studied their surroundings. They were taking no chances.

And, unseen from the great vehicle, a single horseman rode the ridges parallel to the coach, his watchful gaze never leaving the swiftly moving equipage, the sunshine shimmering on the golden coat of his great horse.

THE coach reached the long, brush-covered slope where the meat wagon had been drygulched. Wade Harley, riding just back of the ridge crest, redoubled his vigilance. But the coach rolled on until the ominous slope was left behind.

"Begins to look like our scheme worked," the Texan mused. "Chances are none of the owlhoots down in the gulch had any notion

the stage was carryin' anything out of the ordinary. But just the same I'm keepin' my eyes open. That's salty bunch down there, and one with plenty of savvy. If they pull somethin', it's mighty liable to be somethin' plumb out of the ordinary."

Mile after mile the stage rolled along, with the watchful horseman ever patrolling just out of sight. They passed from the semi-arid land to the fringe of the fertile range, and still nothing happened. Suddenly, however, Wade Harley's eyes focused on the gray ribbon of trail far ahead. A dancing blotch was rolling up beyond the crest of a low rise.

"Looks like somebody comin' this way mighty fast," he muttered.

The distant dust cloud grew in size, spread. It topped the rise, was wafted higher by a gust of wind. Harley saw beneath it a number of bobbing dots that steadily grew plainer as the skittered down the near side of the sag.

"Cows," he exclaimed suddenly. "With half a dozen jiggers shovin' 'em along. Are those hellions loco, drivin' beefs that fast through the heat? Hmmm! looks like a mite of wideloopin' might be in order. No cowman with a grain of savvy would be hustlin' his critters like that."

With growing interest he watched the herd jolt and jostle along the trail, never slackening pace. Nearer and nearer they drew to the lumbering stage.

"They'll have to turn out to pass the coach," Harley told Rojo. "They—Blisteriin' blazes, why didn't I catch on sooner!"

He whirled the red-golden horse and sent him charging through the brush toward the distant trail.

Curly and Adams, on the driver's seat of the coach, also had noted the approaching herd. They studied it as it drew nearer, still holding hard to the trail.

"Say," exclaimed the guard, "if them fellers don't turn out, they'll smack right into us! Are they blind? Don't they see they can't pass us if they stick to the trail?"

His voice rose in a stentorian shout that carried to the fast approaching riders back of the herd:

"Pull off, yuh loco jughaids! Want to smash us up?"

Back to him came a bellowing voice in answer:

"We can't hold 'em!"

"Can't hold 'em, heck!" growled Curly. "Why, they're shovin' 'em—"

It was the voice of old Rimrock Raines inside the coach, Rimrock, wise in every frontier owlhoot trick, that aroused the driver and the outside guard to their danger.

"Take cover, yuh brainless horntoads!" bellowed Raines, peering sideward from a window. "Take cover! Don't yuh see it's a trap?"

That was enough for Curly and Adams. Even as spurts of smoke jetted from the ranks of the cow drivers, they ducked into the hollow behind the steel-backed dashboard. Bullets drummed against their shelter and smacked into the sides of the coach. The arriving cows, frantic with fear, oblivious of anything but escaping from the terror that raved at their heels, smashed head-on into the rearing, squealing mules. A mule went down, kicking, and lashing out with its front hoofs. The others slewed around, cramping the front wheels and all but overturning the coach. The herd divided and drummed past on each side. The guns of the owlhoots blazed and thundered.

Old Rimrock's shotgun let loose with a deafening roar. There was a howl of pain from the outlaw ranks. One man plunged headlong to the ground. The others whipped from their saddles and sought shelter behind the straggle of brush that fringed the trail. Crouching low, eyes gleaming in the shadows of their hat brims, they fired at the steel-lined coach. Curly and Adams, hunkered down behind their barricade, banged away an answering fire. For a moment it looked as if the holdup had been frustrated.

BUT the owlhoots were strategists. They began to fan out fast through the brush. Bullets stormed through the coach windows, forcing Rimrock to crouch low behind the steel sheathing. He was unable to answer fire. Soon the outlaws would be in a position to fire through the openings between the dashboard and the protecting sides of the driver's seat and rake Curly and Adams with slugs.

"Dobie, you and Slim crawl under that wagon!" a voice bellowed from their ranks. "The rest of us will cover yuh with our guns. Set the cussed bed on fire and smoke 'em out."

"I was scared they might try somethin' like that!" yammered Curly, firing blindly over the lip of the dashboard. "Pore Rimrock!"

"Pore us, yuh mean!" growled Adams, shoving fresh cartridges into the smoking barrels of his shotgun. "Yuh think them rattlesnakes is goin' to leave anybody alive to talk? It's Boot Hill for us, feller. Just try to take as many of 'em as yuh can! Blazes! I smell smoke a-ready!"

"They've set fire to the brush under the bed," Curly gritted between his teeth. "So long, fellers. See yuh on the other side!"

CHAPTER XIII

High Stakes

COUGHING and choking, old Rimrock could be heard inside the coach. Smoke was billowing up around the doomed vehicle. The owlhoots howled with exultation.

Abruptly their whoops of triumph changed to yells of consternation and terror as from the brush behind them tore a raging golden horse, ears laid back, eyes rolling, gleaming teeth bared. There was a roar of shots as the tall rider of the golden horse shot with both hands.

One of the crouching owlhoots pitched forward on his face. A second went down writhing and kicking and screaming curses. A third, who had leaped to his feet and started to run, went rolling over and over like a plugged rabbit. The remaining two, screaming and swearing, dashed madly for their horses, firing wild shots at the grim rider as they ran. They flung themselves into their saddles and tore away in a cloud of dust.

Wade Harley sent two more bullets whistling after them before the hammers of his guns clicked on empty shells. He saw one of them reel and clutch at his saddle-horn. Then they were gone over the lip of a rise. Harley leaped to the ground and ran to help Adams and Curly kick the blazing brush beneath the coach and extinguish the smolders that were already eating into the wooden floor.

Old Rimrock Raines stuck his head through a narrow window and breathed in great gulps.

"I ain't never goin' to smoke another bear out of a thicket," he declared fervently. "I know just how the pore critter feels. Boss, I never was so glad to see anybody as I was to see you just now. Where in blazes did yuh come from?"

"I been ridin' the ridges all day, keeping an eye on the stage," Harley replied. "I had a hunch somethin' like this might be tried, and was preparin' against it."

"Thank Pete yuh played that hunch," said Curly, "I figgered our numbers were up. It shore looked like 'Double O on the Black' for Curt and me."

"Let's take a look at them cashed-in jiggers," Harley suggested.

They crossed to the bodies sprawled in the brush.

I've seen two of those hellions before," Curly exclaimed. The little one and that one with the whiskers. I seen 'em both hangin' out in Branch Bascomb's place down in the gulch."

"Well," Adams remarked grimly, "the two that got away can go back and tell their boss

[*Turn page*]

A SMASH-PACKED STORY OF RAWHIDE TOWN!

Though he's known as a man of peace, Sheriff Breck Long shows he hasn't lost his once-vaunted gunslinging ability when a vengeance-bent owlhoot rides into Rawhide—in

TROUBLE BADGE

By

TOM PARSONS

Coming in Next Month's Issue!

things didn't work out exactly as expected."

Wade Harley squatted on his heels and rolled a cigarette.

"Curt," he said to Adams, "do yuh recollect the particulars of the holdup when my uncle and Jackson Lee were cashed in?"

"Why," replied Adams, "as I recollect, a couple jiggers drove a wagon around a bend on that narrow bit of trail seven miles out of Virginia City. They smacked into the stage and there was an awful tangle. In the middle of it, four more jiggers stepped from behind rocks and the shootin' started. Jackson Lee was drilled dead center and yore Uncle Andy was plugged through the middle. He was knocked out but lived for a bout a week before he took the big jump."

Harley blew a smoke ring, his eyes coldly gray.

"Sort of similar procedure to this attempt," he remarked.

"By gum, that's right!" exclaimed Adams. "Only they used a wagon that time instead of a herd of cows to mix things up and distract attention from what they was up to. By gum, I've a notion it was the same bunch!"

"Could be," Harley agreed. "Say, look at the brand on those cows. Aren't they Bradded H's?"

Closer examination of the tired cattle, which were scattered out on the sparse grass, confirmed the statement.

"The hellions picked 'em up down on the Bradded T southeast range," Adams guessed. "Them hosses and sidewinders left behind are all some sort of Mexican brands—don't mean a thing. What shall we do with 'em, boss?"

"Take the rigs off and turn 'em loose to fend for themselves," Harley directed. "They'll make out."

As an afterthought, he turned out the pockets of the dead outlaws. He discovered nothing of significance save a number of bright new gold pieces.

"Plenty of new gold pieces on the tables in Bascomb's place," Curly remarked with emphasis.

"But no proof they got 'em there," Harley quietly reminded him. Curly snorted, but said no more. Harley's eyes, however, were deeply thoughtful.

"Get the mules untangled and let's be movin'," he ordered. "It'll be dark before we get to town as it is. I reckon we won't have any more trouble."

"We'll take care of it if we do," Adams promised grimly. "From now on I'm shootin' at anything that shows up in front of me. What I'd like to know is how them hellions knew the gold shipment would be in our coach. Everythin' was handled careful as could be last night. I'd been ready to swear nobody that hadn't ought to knew we was packin' the shipment."

THAT night, Harley and George Westbrook, the Hangtown agent, carefully went over the parcels of the shipment. Harley suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation. He stared at a package marked:

Branch Bascomb, Ten Thousand Dollars
Nuggets and Dust

Westbrook leaned forward to examine the package. "So Bascomb knew the shipment was goin' out," he growled. "Well, this is interestin'."

Harley continued to stare at the parcel. "I'm ridin' to the gulch tomorrow, to have a talk with Pete Mossman," he announced. . . .

Dusk was falling when Harley dismounted in front of Mossman's cabin the following evening. He entered, and found the partners at home. Mossman was sitting at the table, smoking and glowering. John Evers hunched in a corner, looking abject.

"What's the matter with you fellers?" Harley asked, after they had exchanged greetings.

"Oh, nothin' much," grunted Mossman, "except John went and dropped five thousand dollars last night at the dice table in Branch Bascomb's hole of the devil. John is a fine feller—a man never had a better pard, but he can't let the games alone. I told him he wasn't no match for them slickers."

Harley stared thoughtfully at the speaker. Suddenly he appeared to arrive at a decision.

"Come on," he said, "I'd like to give Bascomb's place a look-see."

The partners agreed, and together they made their way to the saloon, Harley leading Rojo. He tied the golden horse to a rack across the street from Bascomb's place and the three men entered together.

Bascomb was at the end of the bar, as usual. Harley was not a little surprised to see none other than Alison Leee standing beside him. The girl was garbed in a dusty riding outfit. Her piquant face looked strained and worried.

Bascomb appeared to be in a decidedly bad temper. He waved a greeting to Harley, however. The girl gave him a wan smile.

Harley nodded to the pair, but did not approach them. Instead, he wandered aimlessly around the big room with Mossman and Evers, finally pausing at the dice table, which at the moment was not busy. The house man back of the green cloth gave them a sharp look, then rattled the bone cubes in his cupped hands.

"Step up, gents, and have a try at craps," he droned. "Try yore luck with the gallopin' dominoes. Anything from a dollar up—sky's the limit. You throw and the house throws—throw and throw alike."

Harley appeared to hesitate.

"Believe I will take a try at it," he announced.

His companions looked surprised. The table man grinned, and handed him the dice.

Harley took the cubes and rather awkwardly rolled them onto the table in a test throw, but they slipped through his fingers and plumped squarely into the wide mouth of a nearby spittoon.

The table man swore. Harley called for a bar towel. With the towel he carefully fished out the dice, cleaned and dried and polished them.

"Try and do better this time," he said to the table man.

He laid five twenty-dollar gold pieces on the cloth. The table man matched the bet.

"Let 'em roll, feller," he said.

Harley threw the dice, with apparent awkwardness. They showed a seven.

"You win," droned the house man. "How much this time?"

"Let the two hundred ride," Harley replied.

The houseman matched the stacks. Harley threw the dice. They showed five. He rolled them two more times, and matched the five.

"Shoot the four hundred," he said.

With eight hundred dollars in gold on the table, he rattled the dice in his hand. A crowd of miners, attracted by the size of the play and Harley's run of luck, were gathering close around the dice table. Harley threw the dice.

"Seven!" an excited miner yelped. "Feller, yuh win again!"

"Shoot the sixteen hundred dollars," Harley said quitely.

The table man wet his suddenly dry lips. He hesitated, then shoved sixteen hundred dollars in gold pieces out onto the cloth.

"Eleven!" roared a dozen voices. "He wins again!"

"Shoot the thirty-two hundred," said the Texan's quiet voice.

The table man, his face livid, his hands shaking, slowly matched the bet. Harley cupped the dice, and for the first time looked the table man squarely in the eyes, his lips quirking in a smile that had nothing of humor in it.

WITH careless grace he sent the dice onto the cloth. The table man gave a gulp of relief, the crowd murmured as the dice showed ten, one of the hardest points a crap shooter has to make. The odds were against the Texan.

Harley picked up the dice, looked into the table man's eyes, and laughed harshly. He flipped the dice onto the cloth. The table man swore furiously as he glared at the upper surfaces of the cubes. Each showed a five.

"Ten! Big Dick from Boston! He made it!" the crowd howled.

With six thousand four hundred dollars lying on the table in front of him, Harley paused. He reached out, separated the stacks of gold pieces. He shoved the greater portion of them to John Evers.

"There's the five thousand yuh dropped here last night, John," he said. He picked up five gold pieces and dropped them into his pocket.

"And that's the hundred I started with," he added. He turned suddenly to the murmuring crowd. "Gents," he said, "now I'm goin' to show yuh things with these educated dice. I'm goin' to throw a four, a five, a six, and a seven—and out!"

The table man, his face as white as paper, his eyes glaring, raised a hand in a quick, furtive gesture. Harley saw the move but chose to ignore it. He cupped the dice, and in quick succession threw a four, a five, a six, and a seven to crap out. The table man reached for the dice, but Harley's hand was before him. He held up the cubes to the suddenly silent crowd.

"Crooked as the devil!" his voice rang out, carrying through the room. "They're loaded! Anybody who knows how to handle 'em can throw any point he wants to throw, just as I did now!"

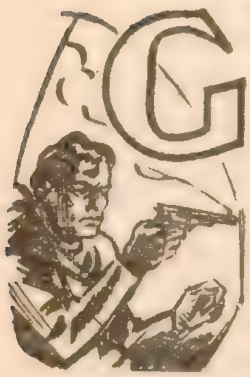
He whirled to face the table man, whose hand was streaking to his left armpit. But before the gambler could draw his shoulder gun, Harley hit him—hit him with all his pent-up fury and his two hundred pounds

of hard muscle back of the blow.

The gambler shot through the air as if he had taken unto himself wings, blood gushing from his nose and mouth. He landed against a table and took it to the floor with him with a crash. Through the sudden uproar knifed a woman's scream.

CHAPTER XIX

"I Do Bequeath—"



GRIMLY Harley whirled toward the end of the bar. Branch Bascomb, his face a mask of rage and hate, had a gun in his hand. Alison Lee was clinging to his arm. Bascomb hurled her to one side and threw up the gun. But before he could pull trigger, Wade Harley's hand flashed down and up. The room rocked to the roar of a shot.

The gun spun from Bascomb's hand and thudded to the floor. He reeled back, clutching at his blood-dripping fingers. Then, as Harley started toward him, he turned and in a single pantherlike bound was through the door that led to the back room beside the bar. The door banged shut. There was the rattle of a shot bolt.

"The skunk's gettin' away!" bawled a big miner. "Get him! Hang him! Hang all the cussed crooks and thieves!"

A roar answered the words. Harley gripped Mossman by the arms and jerked him along with him as he headed for the door of the back room.

"Take care of the girl—get her out of here," he shot at the big miner, and hurled his weight against the closed door.

It resisted his efforts, creaking and groaning. He drew back and hit the clumsy but strong barrier with his shoulder. A third time, and with a splintering of wood and screeching metal, the door crashed open. Harley bounded into the room.

In the corner stood a small iron safe, its door open. Bascomb was nowhere in sight, but a door in the far wall stood ajar. Harley darted to it and flung it wide. To his ears came a patter of swift hoofs. There was a full moon riding high in the sky, and by its light he caught a glimpse of Bascomb riding madly toward the distant mouth of the gulch.

Harley raced around the building, jerked Rojo loose from the rack and forked him. In a thunder of hoofs and a cloud of dust, he tore down the trail after the fugitive. He crashed through the thicket, rounded a bend and saw Bascomb far ahead.

"Trail, Rojo! Trail!" he shouted.

The red horse snorted, slugged his head above the bit and fairly poured his long body over the ground. They flashed out of the bowl and into the narrow opening of the gulch. The long, brush-covered slopes rolled past, with Rojo closing the distance at every stride.

Bascomb was well mounted on a tall black, but his cayuse was no match for Rojo. Before he reached the rock-studded slopes above the gravel belt, Bascomb was turning in his saddle to glance back at his gaining pursuer.

Bascomb reached the edge of the gravel belt. Far above, the moonlight glittered on myriads of cracked stone. He glanced back, faced to the front for a moment, and then glanced back again. His black horse was giving its best, but it was not enough. The racing sorrel was thundering less than a hundred yards in the rear.

Harley saw Bascomb's hand drop. Another instant and reddish flame gushed toward him. The hard, metallic clang of the shot leaped and bounded between the gorge walls. A slug whined past, scant inches from the Texan's face. He hunched lower in the saddle, grimly holding his own fire.

Bascomb shot again, the reports booming like thunder between the gorge walls, shaking the air with their pounding echoes. Harley reached for his gun. Bascomb jerked a second gun and sent a roaring volley hissing and whining about his pursuer. Harley drew his right-hand Colt, flung it up. His green eyes, cold as frosted steel, glanced along the gleaming barrel, his finger tightened on the trigger as Bascomb fired again.

Harley saw the gush of flame from Bascomb's gun, but he never heard the report. It was drowned by a shattering roar. Harley shot a glance up the long, glittering face of the slope.

Both pursuer and pursued had been too intent on the race to note that the whole vast upper slope of the mountain was in motion, every glittering fragment of rock moving like ripples of swift water. The vibrations set up by Bascomb's shots had turned the hidden key that unlocked the fury

of the avalanche.

Now, in shattering thunder, the loosened boulders of the upper slope poured over the cliff to crash upon the lower slope and add its millions of fragments to the flood that roared toward the gorge floor. Branch Bascomb vanished forever under a million tons of stone.

"My turn next," Harley muttered as the long slope tossed and thundered above his head. A huge fragment stirred his hair as it whizzed past. Another crashed to the earth at his very side and showered him with stinging splinters. Rojo screamed his terror and seemed to flash onward with the speed of light. The moving slope roared with a hollow finality.

AND then Harley abruptly realized that the crashing and thundering was behind him. The air he breathed was free from dust. He could again hear the flying beat of Rojo's irons.

"Hold it, feller, hold it!" he shouted, dragging back on the reins. "We're in the clear."

Under the command of hand and voice, the golden horse jolted to a sobbing, quivering halt, to stand with head hanging and legs widespread. Harley slipped to the ground and stood staring at the vast cloud of red dust boiling up from the floor of the gulch.

It was strangely still down there now. Only the occasional hollow clap of a belated boulder bounding down the slope to join its fellows broke the silence. Harley passed a hand across his eyes. His mind was numb. His brain seemed curdled.

Gradually he became conscious of sound up the gorge. He turned. The miners were streaming toward him. They raised a great cheer when they saw him alive and uninjured. First of all came Alison Lee on flying feet, her eyes great purple pools in her white face.

"Oh, Wade," she panted, "you are safe? You're not hurt?"

Harley reached out his long arms and gathered her close.

"Fine as frog hair, honey," he told her. "Everything worked out perfect."

The crowding miners raised another cheer. Harley's arms tightened about Alison.

"First thing in the mornin', you and I are ridin' to Hangtown as fast as we can," he said.

"To Hangtown," she repeated, her eyes wide. "Why to Hangtown?"

Harley chuckled. "Because," he told her, "they got a church at Hangtown—and a preacher!"

Foremost of the miners were Pete Mossman and old Ballou, the camp patriarch. Harley turned to him.

"Take care of her for me tonight, oldtimer," he said.

Ballou's kindly face creased in a smile.

"I'll do that, son," he promised. "Come along, little gal. My cabin ain't much on women's fixin's, but there'll be a comfortable bed, and Granddad Ballou setting in front of the door with a shotgun. Yuh'll sleep sound."

After Allison had departed with the oldster, Pete Mossman drew Harley aside.

"I got Bascomb placed a last," he said. "I recollect now where I saw him. It was down in Tuolumne Valley, five years back. He was run out of a camp there for crooked dealin'. He made it out just ahead of the rope. This time he didn't make it.

"Well," he added, staring at the thinning dust cloud in the gulch, "we got our rocks down at last. It'll be considerable of a chore to clear 'em out of the way, but from now on we can work in peace and safety. By the way, we got that crooked dice shark. He'll talk to save his neck. I understand he's been with Bascomb a long time. Let's go see what he has to say."

The gambler, the fear of death heavy on his soul, talked freely.

"Yes, Bascomb killed yore uncle and Jackson Lee," he told Harley. "He tried to kill you up in Echo Canyon, and when yuh drove that meat wagon. He figgered out the holdup the other day. He knew the shipment was due to go out—put some of his own dust in along with the other packages."

"That's right," corroborated Mossman. "I didn't figger him to do anything like that. He was gettin' to be a sort of prominent citizen hereabouts. I agreed to handle his dust. Reckon I made a mistake."

"Bascomb was responsible for the forest fire at Lake Tahoe?" Harley asked.

"That's right, too," the gambler replied. "Higgins, the driver, set it. He come nigh onto bein' run down when he was snoopin' around the Great Divide station. Got slugged in the arm."

"Why did Bascom kill my uncle and Jackson Lee?" Harley asked.

"He wanted to get control of the stage lines," the gambler explained. "Old Jackson Lee used to think mighty well of him. He

saved Lee's life once, took a considerable chance hisself to do it. Yuh can say that for Bascomb, he waren't scared of nothin'.

"He wanted the stage lines and he wanted the gal, Lee's daughter. He knew Lee was catchin' onto him at last. Lee had made a will givin' Bascomb control of his property in case anythin' happened to him, Lee. I guess he also figgered Bascomb to marry his daughter, but he'd begun to change his mind.

"Bascomb knew somethin' had to be done, so he cashed in Lee, and cashed in Andy Harley, too. He figgered with Harley out of the way he could smash up the Great Divide and have the whole stage-coach business to hisself. Young Harley comin' along spoiled his plans. He knew he had to get rid of young Harley, too, but Harley seemed to take considerable killin'.

"Bascomb aimed to make one last haul by robbin' the stage of the gold shipment, and then clear out. The gal couldn't help but think well of him because of him savin' her dad's life that time, but she was beginnin' to catch on, too.

"She came down last night to try to talk him into straightenin' up. I figger she was gettin' scared about Wade Harley. She's smart, and I reckon she was gettin' the notion Bascomb was back of the trouble Harley was havin'. I understood she promised Bascomb she would sign over the stage-coach business to him if he'd change his ways. Reckon she was doin' that for you, Harley. Well, I guess that's about all."

PETE MOSSMAN stared at the pallid-faced gambler.

"What shall we do with this horntoad?" he asked Harley.

"Turn him loose, give him a horse and send him out of the country," Harley replied. "After all, he may have been all right before Bascomb got hold of him. We'll give him a chance to make good. Mebbe he's had a lesson tonight that will straighten him up."

"And the others we go corralled—what'll we do with them? Hang 'em?"

Harley shook his head.

"Let's give law and order a chance," he said. "Call in the sheriff and turn 'em over to him. Let 'em have a fair trial and get justice. It's time for this country to start growin' up."

"Figger mebbe yuh're right." The miner nodded. "Now's a good time to start."

In the course of their ride back to Hangtown the following day, Harley and Alison pulled up to gaze at the great Bradded H ranchhouse. The girl sensed what was passing through his mind. She leaned over and laid a comforting hand on his.

"Never mind, Wade," she said. "We'll save our money, and buy it some day."

"Uh-huh," Harley replied teasingly. "It'll be a nice place for our grandchildren to grow up in."

Alison blushed, but her blue eyes did not waver.

"I'm going to bring up my children in the Bradded H ranchhouse!" she declared stoutly.

After the simple ceremony in the old Hangtown church, Wade Harley and his pretty wife repaired to the Great Divide station to receive congratulations and well wishes. They found a letter from old John Arbuckle, the Webb lawyer, awaiting them.

Will arrive in Virginia City for the final reading of Andrew Harley's will on the fifteenth of the month. Will expect you to be at the Virginia City Bank at three o'clock in the afternoon.

"And today is the thirteenth," said Harley. "We just got time to make it."

When they arrived at the Virginia City Bank, Wade and Alison found the president's office occupied not only by the banker and John Arubuckle, but by old George Hearst and tall, keen-eyed William Stewart as well. Hearst greeted them with jovial heartiness. Arbuckle gazed approvingly at Wade Harley's lean, deeply bronzed face as they shook hands. "Yuh look fine, son," he declared.

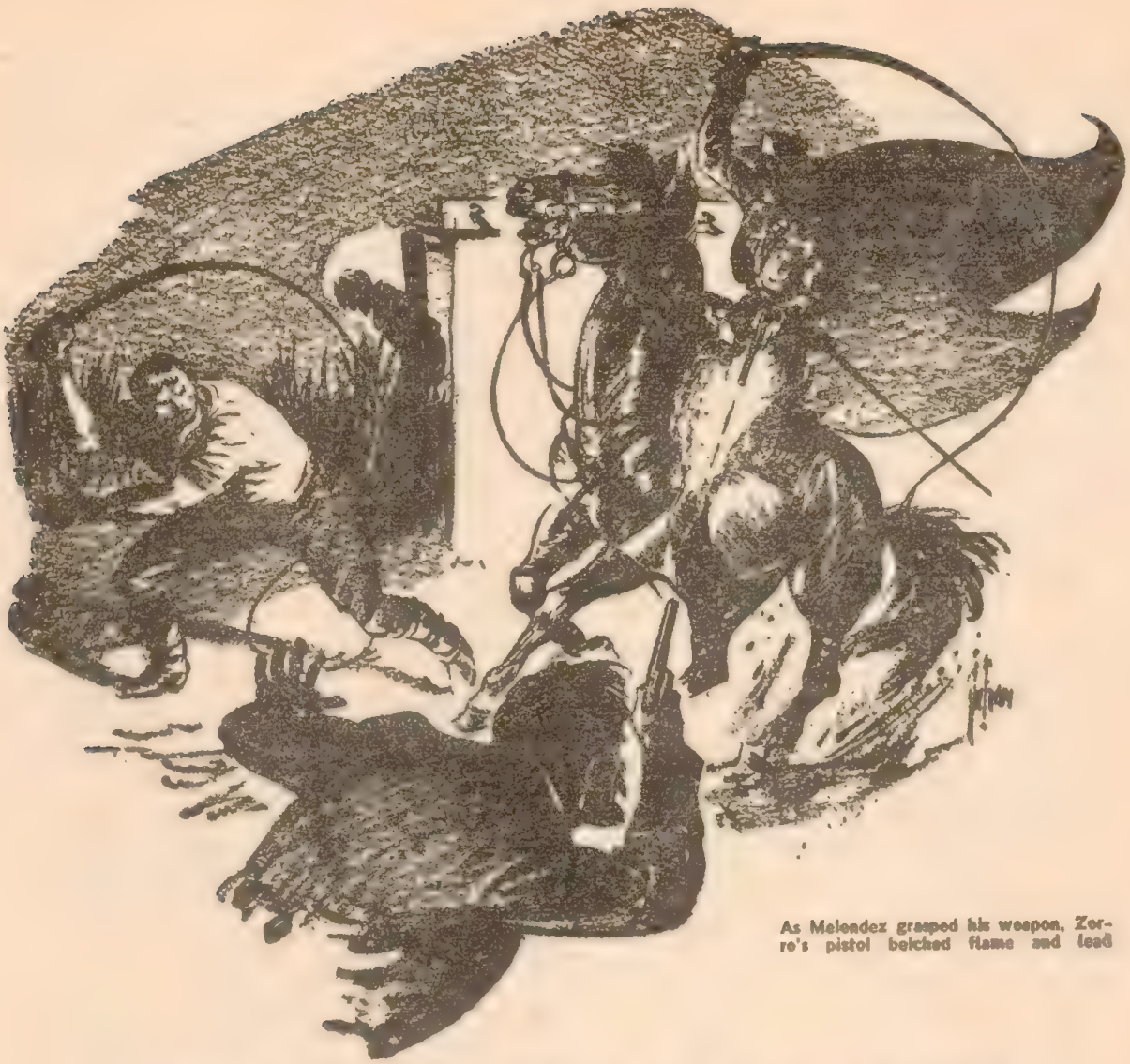
"And he shore knows how to handle mules—and pick women!" rumbled old George Hearst with an approving chuckle.

Arbuckle's glance was also decidedly approving as it rested on the blue-eyed girl.

"And now," he remarked in his ponderous fashion, "I will conclude the reading of the last will and testament of Andrew Harley, deceased."

He sat down, rustled the papers in his hands, cleared his throat and read:

In event that the further condition set down in this document is not complied with, my property known as the Bradded H cattle ranch, and my stock in the Gould and Curry Mine shall be bestowed upon the charitable institutions outlined in the accompanying memoranda. The Bradded H cattle ranch and the Gould and Curry stock shall become the property of my nephew, Wade Harley, on the condition that at the time of the final reading of this will, he is married to Alison Lee, the daughter of my old friend Jackson Lee.



As Melendez grasped his weapon, Zorro's pistol belched flame and lead

ZORRO'S STRANGE DUEL

By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

A brutal taskmaster meets his punishment when a masked avenger comes a-riding to deal out a taste of the whip!

DOWN the broad gradual slope that led toward the big shearing pens, bleating their plaintive protests as they traveled, came thousands of sheep heavy with their coats of wool. Herders were shouting stridently, the sheep dogs were barking at their charges, and clouds of fine dust were lifting behind the flocks.

The eyes of Diego Vega were glowing as he watched the scene. He loved the Rancho

AN EXCITING DON DIEGO VEGA STORY

Vega, which had been in his family since the vast unimproved acreage had been granted to an ancestor by the King of Spain. He loved its great flocks and herds, its broad acres with rolling hills and shady canyons.

He liked to look over the fruitful orchards and vineyards, and inspect the scattered adobe buildings—the store-houses, workers' huts, the stables. And most of all he liked to stroll leisurely through the sprawling rancho house which nestled in a grove of gigantic pepper trees whose crimson berries stained the ground in season—the place where he had been born.

Now, sheep-shearing time had come again in California. In an hour or so, the first of the sheep would be in the shearing pens.

The regular workers on the rancho, and the extra help—peons and natives engaged especially for the shearing—were standing by, ready to commence their work. They had removed their hats and bowed their heads while aged Fray Felipe, the *padre* from the chapel in Reina de Los Angeles, had given them his blessing.

The extra workers would receive a red metal marker as each sheep was shorn properly and the fleece put aside, to be cashed in at the end of the shearing season. This had been a bountiful year, for the lambing had been greater than usual, and the shearing would take some time and payment be greater than in other years.

The herders had driven their flocks in from the high hills and fertile valleys where grazing was good to report to Cassara, the rancho overseer, and have their flocks tallied to show the increase. The herders soon would receive their reward for the season's work. And when the shearing was over there would be the usual *fiesta,* with an abundance of food and wine, music and dancing for all.

TWO adjoining ranchos also were starting their sheepshearing today. One was the property of a proud old *hidalgo,* a friend of the Vega family. The other property had been purchased a year or so before from a dissolute heir by a man named Pedro Melendez. He was a person of no special standing, and was reported to be unscrupulous and cruel, and to have made his money by crooked gambling.

Because there generally were fights between the rancho *vaqueros* and imported workmen, Sergeant Manuel Garcia, from the barracks at Reina de Los Angeles, was present with three of his best troopers to keep the peace. The fights were usually inspired by jealousy over some native wench, or because the *vaqueros,* being handlers of cattle, assumed themselves superior to the handlers of sheep.

Diego Vega was sitting his saddle on a spirited horse in a dispirited manner beside his mounted father, Don Alejandro. Diego sagged forward in his saddle and yawned at intervals as if the whole affair bored him and he considered it only a necessary nuisance.

The lips of his stern father twisted slightly at the corners as he watched his son. Only Don Alejandro and two others knew that Diego, who posed as an indolent fop, was also the mysterious Senor Zorro, the fox, who rode the highways and punished those who showed cruelty and inhumanity to men in lesser circumstances.

A short distance away, an assistant overseer with a stentorian voice was announcing the arrival of the various flocks and the names of their chief herders. The gates of the shearing pens were opened, the first sheep were admitted, and the work of shearing began.

Fray Felipe dismounted from the back of his riding mule and went among the workers like a kind father among his children, cheering them on in their work. Don Alejandro dismounted and handed his reins to a peon waiting to take them, and Diego did also. Father and son always walked through the shearing pens each year as the work began.

As father and son walked past them, the workers stopped long enough to knuckle their foreheads in salute and respect. Diego held a scented handkerchief to his nostrils as if the stench of sheep, fleece and sweat nauseated him.

As they emerged from the last of the shearing pens, their inspection concluded, Cassara, the rancho overseer, approached and saluted them.

"Is everything going well, Cassara?" Don Alejandro asked.

"The fleece is heavy this season, Don Alejandro, the number of animals to be sheared is greater than usual, and we have good workers," Cassara replied. "But there is one thing I dislike."

"And what is that?" Don Alejandro asked.

"José Amaro, the labor contractor from Reina de Los Angeles, has furnished the rancho with twenty men, fifteen of them being natives. I am sure he is mistreating

and swindling them."

"How is this?"

"He stands over them continually with a whip, urging them to work faster and harder. He uses the whip frequently across their backs. And when the red markers are given to the men he takes them to hold for cashing, saying the men are in debt to him already for food and clothing furnished by him. He is making slaves of the poor wretches, Don Alejandro."

"A thing like that cannot be allowed on Rancho Vega," Don Alejandro replied sternly. "Here, we always treat men as men. Show me where this José Amaro has his men at work."

Cassara led Don Alejandro and Diego through one of the shearing pens almost to the rear end, and stopped there and pointed.

José Amaro was a short, heavy-set man with bulging biceps. There was a deep scar across his chin, and one of his eyes drooped from an injury. He gave evidence of having led a violent life.

Amaro's jacket was off and his sleeves were rolled up above his elbows. He held a long heavy whip with a braided lash. His men were working in a line across the end of the shearing shed. There was a narrow raised walk behind them, and José Amaro strode back and forth on this walk, shouting to the men for greater activity and threatening to use the whip.

The natives in the group of workers were laboring feverishly, like men fearing the lash. Don Alejandro and Cassara both knew that the threat held over them constantly, impaired their work instead of bettering it.

STANDING off to one side and watching, Don Alejandro and the others in the group were not observed by Amaro, who was busy scanning his men and driving them to their work.

Sergeant Garcia and one of his three troopers came from outside the pen and approached to announce their presence to Don Alejandro and to be assigned to quarters by Cassara, having waited until the ceremonies were over and the actual shearing had commenced.

Diego was looking at José Amaro, estimating him. He watched him brandish his whip and listened as Amaro called the men lazy dogs and promised dire punishment if their work tally was not satisfactory at the end of the day.

"There is a base fellow," Diego whispered to his father, "and he irks me."

"To what extent, Diego?" Don Alejandro asked, his eyes gleaming as he looked at his son.

"Before I reply to that, my father, let us ascertain whether this fellow is really cruel or only blustery."

"And if he is cruel?"

"If he is, Senor Zorro may have some riding to do."

As they were speaking, aged Fray Felipe came through the long shearing shed and toward them, blessing the workers as he passed. The *padre* and the sergeant reached the Vegas and Cassara at the same time.

As they arrived, there was an uproar at the end of the shed. A whip cracked and a man screeched with mingled rage and pain. José Amaro's rough voice could be heard:

"Work, scum! Earn your food! Earn red markers for me! I'll shred the skin of your back with the whip!"

Cassara was the first to start forward, for he did not want this affair to get the other workers stirred up and cause them to become unsettled and fail to do their work properly. At a nod from Don Alejandro, Sergeant Garcia hurried after the overseer. Don Alejandro and Diego, with Fray Felipe between them, went forward also.

Before even Cassara reached the spot, there was a wild screech from a man's throat and a scramble as one of the native workers sprang toward José Amaro and tried to stab him with his sharp wool shears. Amaro warded off the blow with his left forearm, then his right first crashed into the face of the native who had attacked him, smashing his nose and hurling him off the elevated walk to fall senseless on the floor of the shed.

"Any more of you scum want to try it?" Amaro howled, his eyes ablaze as he grasped the whip firmly.

Then Sergeant Garcia, who had rushed on at Don Alejandro's signal, was upon the infuriated man with his trooper at his heels. Everybody in the shed had stopped work to watch what happened. Garcia and the trooper seized Amaro, tore the whip from his grasp, and held him firmly.

"Let your blood cool," Garcia advised, as the labor contractor ceased struggling.

"That fiend—he attacked me," Amaro cried. "I'll have his hide off his back in strips! Release me!"

"We saw the whole affair," the sergeant

told him. "You struck him across the back with your whip."

"These natives are working out debts to me," Amaro said. "They are lazy, slow, being so purposely."

"How do you expect them to work well when you stand over them with a whip?" Don Alejandro asked.

"I contracted with the rancho to supply twenty men, and here they are," the contractor replied. "I know how to get work out of them, either natives or peons. That man was not working well and I whipped him to bring him back to life."

"And now you have made him senseless with a blow, and probably will get no more work at all out of him for some days," Garcia pointed out.

"He attacked me with the shears—you say you saw it. Sergeant Garcia, I demand that you arrest the fellow and take him to your barracks and throw him into the prison room. I want the *magistrado* to sentence him to the whipping post!"

"One moment!" Garcia thundered. "Do you perhaps think that you are His Excellency the Governor? You *demand* I do this and that, do you? And you would give our *magistrado* his orders also?"

"I know my rights!"

"Every man has rights," Fray Felipe put in, softly.

"But this native scum—"

"Is a human being," the *padre* interrupted.

José Amaro laughed aloud. "A human being, and he has rights—a bronze, ignorant, lazy native! This is what comes of letting the *padres* convert them and tell them that they are better than they really are."

"Silence!" Sergeant Garcia roared. "You are speaking to a *padre*."

DIEGO VEGA felt his blood commence boiling. The brutal treatment of the native, Amaro's arrogance, this insult to the aged *padre* and his kind—Diego wished he dare take this affair into his own hands right now.

But he had his pose to maintain, as protection for himself and his father. He could not be Zorro at the moment. He was the fashionably dressed weakling now. He held in his rage and kept in the background.

Both his father and Fray Felipe knew what he was thinking. Besides his father, the *padre* was another of the three men who knew the truth about Zorro, and the *padre* was his confessor and could not reveal the truth—and would not have done so. The third who knew was Bernardo, Diego's peon body servant, who was a mute and could not speak.

Don Alejandro stepped forward.

"Things like this cannot be allowed on Rancho Vega," he said. "We treat everybody kindly here."

"It is a mistake, Don Alejandro, to coddle such vermin," Amaro declared. "It sets a bad example for other rancho owners."

Don Alejandro's eyes burned and his chin was thrust out as he took a step forward.

"Are you, senor, presuming to tell me how to run a rancho?" he demanded. "You are insolent!"

"If a native dolt is a man like me, as the *padre* has said, then I am as good as a don," the contractor said.

Diego had to fight himself well to hold himself in check then. To hear his aged, adored father addressed so by a brutal, swindling handler of unfortunate men—it was too much! But he could not rush in and handle the man with all the others in the shed watching the scene and others hurrying from the other sheds to learn of the commotion.

Don Alejandro handled the matter himself.

"Get off the rancho with your men!" he ordered Amaro.

"I have a contract—"

"Cassara!" Don Alejandro ordered the overseer. "Pay this man for one day for himself and his workers. Care for the man he has hurt. Sergeant Garcia, kindly call your other two troopers and see that this man loads his cart and clears out immediately."

"At once, Don Alejandro," the sergeant agreed.

Don Alejandro faced the other men the contractor had brought.

"If any of you wish to remain here and work for the rancho and be paid for it, you may do so," he said. "I'll see that you are not bothered by this fellow Amaro."

"Most of them are bound to me for debt!" the contractor screeched. "It is illegal!"

"How many are so bound?"

"The fifteen natives."

"Then the other five peons may remain here and work in peace," Don Alejandro decided. "The hurt man will be cared for until he is well again. Take the others, Amaro, clean out your huts, load your cart

and go. And do not let me learn later that you have mistreated any of these poor men."

"Once off your land, I'll do as I please," Amaro replied. "Even the proud and powerful Don Alejandro Vega doesn't run the entire country!"

Don Alejandro's face purpled with rage. But Sergeant Garcia's other two troopers had reached the scene, and the sergeant and his men prepared to take Amaro and his workers out of the shearing shed.

"See that they leave Rancho Vega land," Don Alejandro told the sergeant. "We do not use slave labor here."

"This is not the only rancho in the district," Amaro said. "I can hire my men to Pedro Melendez easily enough. And I'll make them work."

"I'll look in on you, to see that you do not go too far with your whip and fists," Sergeant Garcia promised. "Come along!"

As the men were taken from the shed, Don Alejandro whispered to Cassara:

"Have some good man follow and watch, and bring back a report."

Cassara nodded and turned aside to see that the others had commenced shearing again. Fray F'elipe had gone to comfort the workers with his presence. Don Alejandro and Diego left the shed and strolled toward where their horses were waiting.

"My father," Diego said.

"Yes, my son?"

"If the report comes back that Amaro has shown more cruelty, Zorro will ride tonight."

"He never rode in a worthier cause," Don Alejandro declared.

THE troopers took Amaro and his workmen to the huts which had been assigned to them, and instructed them to gather their belongings, cooking pots and supplies and load them in Amaro's cart, a huge affair drawn by mules.

When the cart was loaded, Amaro got upon it to drive the mules, making his men walk beside the vehicle where he could keep his eyes on them. Garcia and his troopers escorted the cart down the road and to the highway, outside Vega land.

"Go your way!" the sergeant ordered. "I am none too soft where some of the natives are concerned, but too much brutality is too much. And you were insolent to a good *padre*, and to Don Alejandro Vega, known for his many acts of kindness. Get you gone!"

José Amaro bowed mockingly and started the mules. The workmen trudged along beside the cart.

At a distance, Cassara's spy followed them unseen.

It was only a short distance from the Rancho Vega to that of Pedro Melendez. There, José Amaro was greeted warmly, for Melendez, because of his reputation, had been unable to get enough shearers.

Amaro explained what had happened at Rancho Vega.

"Here, *amigo*, you are your own man," Melendez told him. "How you handle your peons and natives is no affair of mine, as long as you get work done."

"I'll see to that," Amaro promised.

"Take those huts over there for your men," Melendez instructed. "There is ample fuel for your cooking pots, and you can draw food from my overseer, also a skin of wine for yourself. I'll come over this evening and drink with you, and perhaps we can have some fun making your natives dance."

"I'll make them dance!" Amaro promised. "Like they never have danced before! After what happened, they must be convinced that it is a bad thing to lift hands against their betters."

"It grows late in the afternoon," Melendez said. "Fix your camp, and put your group at work in the morning."

A couple of hours after dusk, Cassara went to the rancho house and asked to see Don Alejandro and Don Diego. His report was soon made.

"The man I sent to watch has returned," the overseer said. "Amaro hired his men to Pedro Melendez, and they made camp at some of the old huts. Later, Melendez and his overseer visited Amaro's camp. Amaro had been drinking heavily of wine. He and Melendez were still drinking when our man left, after seeing much."

"What did he see?" Diego asked.

"Amaro has been punishing the men one by one, drawing out what he calls fun, and Melendez watches and laughs with him. Amaro makes a man dance until he drops from exhaustion, using the whip on him meanwhile. Melendez carries a pistol, and he threatened to use it on any man who moved against Amaro, and say afterward that the man attacked him."

"Has this story spread?" Diego asked.

"Sergeant Garcia knows what is happening, but I told our man to say nothing about it to anybody else."

Cassara bowed and left. Sitting at the table with Diego and his father was Fray Felipe. Diego looked first at one of them and then at the other, got up and paced the floor a short time, then stopped beside them.

"It is settled," he said quietly. "Zorro rides tonight."

"Punish, but do not kill save to protect your own life," the *padre* admonished.

Diego nodded and wandered from the room, through the patio, and to the rear kitchens. There he found the dumb Bernardo devouring food, and beckoned him.

"Zorro rides," Diego said. "Get the horse and everything ready, and meet me in the usual place at the abandoned warehouse. None of the sheep shearers are quartered there. And not the middle of the night this time, Bernardo—but now."

Bernardo went back to finish his meal and then slip away unobserved. Diego strolled back into the house and found his father and the *padre* still there.

"This must be done at once," he explained in whispers. "My absence from the house must be covered if any ask for me."

"No doubt you will be prowling around the men's fires listening to them sing, or looking at the moon and thinking of poetry," Don Alejandro replied. "Use great care, Diego."

GOING to his own room, Diego remained there for a short time, reading, with the draperies drawn aside so anybody passing could glance through and see him. Presently he drew the draperies, waited for a short time as if preparing to retire, then extinguished the tapers in the room.

By a way he knew well, he got out of the house, avoided the huts where *vaqueros* and workmen were playing music and dancing as they ate and drank, and went through the orchard and to the old adobe warehouse, where Bernardo was waiting.

Bernardo held Zorro's black horse, and Zorro's costume and weapons. Diego worked swiftly to draw on the Zorro black costume over his other clothing, buckle on blade, thrust pistol into belt, and make sure his long whip was fastened to his saddle.

He had made these preparations many times to punish some beast who mistreated the weak and helpless. But never had he prepared with greater enthusiasm than tonight.

Don Diego Vega, the indolent popinjay, disappeared. In his stead was Zorro, a man with every sense alert, every nerve on edge, who had changed in bodily carriage, manner and voice.

He instructed Bernardo to remain there and wait for his return, then rode through the night, keeping off the road and avoiding the main highway. There was a moon, but scudding clouds obscured it more than half the time. Zorro soon covered the short distance to the buildings of the Pedro Melendez rancho.

Without trouble, he located the bunch of old adobe huts where José Amaro and his men were quartered. They were at a safe distance, he judged, from the huts of the regular rancho men and the other extra sheep shearers.

A fire burned before Amaro's hut. Zorro could hear loud, raucous laughter, the crack of a whip, a man's yelp of pain. He watched and listened carefully for a short time, then urged his powerful black horse forward.

Keeping to the shadows, and advancing once for a distance when the moon was behind the scudding clouds, he neared the spot he wanted to reach.

He could view the scene clearly now. Both Pedro Melendez and José Amaro were in a state of drunken cruelty. Of Amaro's men, several were stretched on the ground groaning. Two others had been tied to stakes with their wrists bound behind their backs.

Amaro was striding back and forth cracking his whip, and one of the natives was kneeling before him with the ragged shirt torn from his back.

"Make him dance again, Amaro", Melendez was calling. "He's your man, in bond to you for debt. I'll watch these other scum of yours. If one makes a move, I'll pistol him. That one who said he'd complain to the troopers—save that rogue for the last. He needs a dose of bitter medicine."

"He'll get it," Amaro said. "Ha! How I wish I had that proud Don Alejandro Vega and his weak son here before me! I'd make them dance."

Zorro took advantage of another cloud in front of the moon and edged the black closer, finally stopping him in the darkness at the side of the hut nearest the fire. His every sense was alert, for this was a position of danger. If a tumult began, many of Pedro Melendez' men would come running at his call. The element of surprise, quick punishment, and quick retreat were needed here.

"On your feet, dog!" Amaro barked at the kneeling native. "There's no *padre* here to help you now. Dance!"

"Senor, I cannot," the native whimpered. "I am so tired I cannot stand."

"I'll make you jump," Amaro declared.

The whip cracked and the lash bit into the man's back. He gave a cry of pain and helplessness and sprawled on his face in the gravely dirt. Amaro lifted the whip again.

"Up, and dance!" he ordered.

Pedro Melendez took another swig from the wineskin he was holding, and laughed.

Zorro dug with his spurs and jumped his black horse around the corner of the hut, to skid him to a stop a short distance from the fire.

"Do not strike again, Amaro!" Zorro's deep voice warned.

With an ejaculation of surprise, Melendez struggled to get to his feet. Amaro dropped his arm to his side, and his eyes bulged and his lower jaw sagged.

BEFORE them, they saw the black horse, the masked rider dressed in black, and plainest of all the menacing pistol he held.

"You—you—" Melendez muttered.

"I am known as Zorro. Stand still! Do not reach for your pistol, Melendez, or I fire! Steady!"

Zorro glanced swiftly at Amaro's victims. Some were too weak to arise from the ground. Those tied to the stakes could only goggle and mutter. The others were docile, and like men stunned.

"Amaro," Zorro told him, "I have come to teach you that you cannot beat and mistreat and steal from other men even under the guise of a law that gives you power over their persons when they are in debt to you. You are a swindler and thief! I know your history well."

Amaro was licking at lips suddenly dried by fear. He glanced toward Pedro Melendez, but the rancho owner was only standing and swaying after having managed to get to his feet.

"Come up to me and turn your back, Amaro," Zorro ordered. "I am going to whip you as you have whipped other men, and let you learn how it feels to have a lash bite into your bare back. Then, you will release these poor unfortunates and give up all claims against them, and let them go their way free men. And you, José Amaro, will quit this part of the country forever. If you do not, I'll visit you again, and your punishment will be even more severe."

"There is law—" Amaro began.

"Back up to me! And you, Pedro Melendez, stand still! I will hold my pistol in my left hand as I whip, and will use it if you make a move."

Amaro was on Zorro's right as he transferred the pistol to his left hand and got his heavy whip off the pommel of his saddle. Melendez was ahead of the black horse and slightly to the left.

Zorro had no time to rearrange their positions. It was still early in the night, and the sheep shearers were roistering around their fires a short distance away. And the moon was playing hide and seek with the clouds, shining brightly one moment and obscured the next. The light from the fire exposed the scene, too, to anybody who might happen to look that way.

"Mercy, Senor Zorro!" Amaro moaned.

"A cowardly brute is always a craven," Zorro told him. "So you whine, eh? Men have asked you for mercy, and they got no more than I am going to give you now."

As Amaro started to turn and back up toward the black horse, Pedro Melendez made a bold move. He knew what it would mean for him if he could capture or kill the famous Zorro. Officials would bless him for it, and he would receive a rich reward.

He stepped aside quickly, and his right hand made a dive toward his sash to grasp the pistol there. But Zorro saw the move from the corner of his eye. His own pistol flamed and barked and belched smoke and lead. Melendez dropped his weapon without firing, staggered and sprawled as a breast wound began bleeding.

The firing had been heard in the distance, and there was a sudden cessation of singing around the fires. And, as Zorro turned his head to deal with Amaro, he heard the swish of a lash, a whip missed his head and curled over his shoulder, and the end of the lash bit into his back.

Taking advantage of the instant in which Zorro had been compelled to attend to Melendez, Amaro had whirled and began lashing with his whip, a weapon with which he was adept through long cruel practise.

Amaro continued lashing as Zorro swerved his horse. And the labor contractor shouted as he fought:

"Help! Help! Senor Melendez is being attacked!"

Zorro was using his own whip now. And this was the strangest duel he ever had fought. He felt a measure of fear, too. Amaro's lash could mark him if it landed squarely. It would cut through his clothing, even through his cloth mask and mark his face—and possibly point the way to Zorro.

His pistol had been discharged, and he could not use that. It would be difficult to draw blade without being cut by Amaro's whip, and he did not care to stain his *caballero's* blade with the blood of such a wretch. Nor did he wish to kill now—only to give a cruel rogue degrading punishment and drive him out of the country.

THE whips met, wrapped around each other. Zorro jerked Amaro toward him violently, and the whips held. Another jerk, Amaro let go his grasp, and his whip became untangled from Zorro's and sailed through the air.

"Help! Help!" Amaro was screeching.

Men had left the other fires and were running toward the spot. Zorro jumped his horse toward Amaro, and now his whip sang through the air and the lash cut into Amaro's body, until he was prone on the ground, a whining thing. "Get out of the country, or we meet again!" Zorro warned.

Shouting men were rushing toward him, brandishing all sorts of weapons, as he hooked his whip to his saddle and gathered up the reins to ride. Then he heard hoofbeats.

"Well done, Senor Zorro!" the voice of Sergeant Garcia roared. "We have been watching. But now, senor—outlaw and highwayman—you belong to me. Surrender to the Law!"

Gracia and one of his troopers, having heard of Amaro's cruelty from Cassara's spy, had ridden over to learn the truth of the affair. But here was bigger game for Garcia—Senor Zorro, who bore on his head the Governor's reward for capture or death.

This was no time for hesitation. Zorro wheeled his horse, bent low in the saddle, and rode. Pistols exploded behind him and bullets whistled past him, but none struck home. The moon went behind the scudding clouds again for a short time, and Zorro, knowing this land well, rode with greater speed than the more cautious troopers.

He circled away from the rancho buildings, slowed down his horse, and made a big circle to get back to Rancho Vega. Bernardo was waiting at the abandoned warehouse.

"Hide everything—be quick!" Zorro said.

He stripped off his costume, mask, weapons then began running beneath the trees of the orchard to get back to the house. He could feel blood soaking his clothes from the whip cut on his back. Fray Felipe could attend to the wound, he knew.

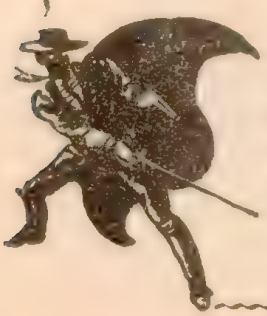
Without being observed, he got into the patio. A serape had been left on a bench there, and Diego Vega threw it over his shoulder carelessly so it would cover his blood-soaked clothing from the eyes of servants.

His father and Fray Felipe were sitting in the main room of the house talking when he entered, and got to their feet in alarm.

"Diego, your face is white!" his father began.

"A whip cut on my back is all. Fray Felipe, come and attend me. But all is well. We are shearing sheep on the rancho now, but tonight I have sheared a wolf."

A COMPLETE *ZORRO* NOVEL NEXT MONTH!



WHEN thieves and highwaymen disrupt the peace of Alta California, the masked avenger of the night rides forth to strike down a vicious ring of death and destruction in A TASK FOR ZORRO, by JOHNSTON McCULLEY—next month's featured headliner.

The appearance of a new ZORRO novel by McCulley is one of the big events of the year—and in A TASK FOR ZORRO the fighting hidalgo is at his swashbuckling best!

Look forward to this outstanding fiction treat in the next issue—it's a humdinger packed with gallantry and glamour, thrills and action, from start to finish!

His head struck the boards, and the gun fell from his hand

WELCOME TO BOOTHILL

By GUNNISON STEELE

There was just exactly enough leavening in Johnny Pine's biscuits to raise a whale of a lot of trouble all around!

IT WAS almost sundown when Johnny Pine saw Sid Bogart riding along Foxtail Creek toward his cabin. The blocky redhead's smoky eyes narrowed thoughtfully on the approaching rider, then he stepped back into the cabin and strapped on his old six-shooter.

Johnny Pine was an easy-going, peaceable sort of gent who liked to avoid trouble whenever he could. That was why, earlier in the afternoon, he had waited on the trail a couple of miles out from the town of Wapiti for his talk with Sid Bogart instead of in town where others could hear what he had to say. There'd been some pretty hard words between them, after Johnny had flatly accused Bogart of butchering several of his steers. Furthermore, in a sudden flare of bitter anger at Bogart's sneering defiance, Johnny had revealed that he knew Bogart was wanted in Texas on a rustling charge.

"If yuh knew all that," Sid Bogart had jeered, "why ain't yuh gone to the law?"

"Because I don't want to cause folks trouble," Johnny had answered. "That's why I waited for yuh out here, instead of raisin' a smell in town, to give yuh a chance."

"Hogwash! Yuh're bluffin'—yuh got no proof."

"Plenty to stand up in court. As to how I know about that rustlin' charge in Texas, I was raised on the Piperock range down there. Just before I left, I remember they had a young gent up for brand-blottin'. Likely he didn't see me, didn't even know me, but I was in the courtroom when he was convicted and sentenced to ten years in the pen. But a couple of nights later, I heard, he broke jail and got away."

Bogart's face had gone pale and taut.

"What's that got to do with me?"

"When you squatted on that old abandoned homestead next to my place, two years ago, I recognized you at once. But I kept quiet,

figurin' maybe yuh'd learned yore lesson and meant to go straight."

"Somebody's allus accusin' me of somethin'," Bogart had whined. "Like when somebody broke into the express office six months ago. And when yore own partner, old Bill Tully, was waylaid, robbed and killed on the trail nearly a year ago by a masked bandit. It was whispered about that it was me done that, and I reckon you believed it."

Johnny Pine's eyes went cold and hard. Bill Tully had been a sober, hard-working, loyal man. Together they had built the little outfit on Foxtail Creek into a paying proposition, dreaming of the day when it would grow and take in many fertile acres. All that had ended when old Bill, riding homeward with several hundred dollars from a cattle sale in his pocket, had been stopped on the trail by a masked bandit. Bill had lived just long enough to tell that. The killer had never been apprehended.

"If I'd had any real reason to believe that," Johnny had said bleakly, "I'd have killed yuh a long time ago. And about them steers yuh butchered and sold to Sam Gorse's meat market in town. I'm givin' yuh until sundown to pay me for 'em. If yuh ain't paid me by then, I'm headin' for town to tell the sheriff what I know!"

He'd wheeled his horse and ridden off, followed by Sid Bogart's jeering laughter. He'd been willing to play fair with Bogart. Still was. . . .

BOGART, a lanky dark-faced man slightly older than Johnny Pine, came slowly on. Although he was gunbelted, Bogart showed no sign of stealth or hostility as he rode up and stopped before the cabin.

Johnny, who had been starting to fix supper, stepped to the cabin door. Bogart regarded him uncertainly, at first, then grinned a trifle sheepishly.

"I been thinkin' about what happened this afternoon, kid," he said, "and decided to ride over and palaver some with yuh."

Johnny nodded. "Shore, Sid. Light down and come inside."

Bogart swung to the ground.

"All right, I will, just to show there's no hard feelin's."

Although puzzled, and still wary, Johnny was glad to see the apparent change in Bogart. He stepped aside for Bogart to enter the cabin.

"I was just startin' to throw some grub together," he said. "I'll fix enough for two."

"I et before I left home," Bogart declared, shuffling his feet embarrassedly. "But you go right ahead. Won't take me long to say what I come to say."

"Shore," Johnny agreed, and struck a match to the kindling in the stove. "Take yore time."

Bogart hesitated, turning his hat in his hands.

"I got to thinkin' and—well, I saw I was wrong. I see now I been lookin' at things kind of haywire. And seein' you been so white—givin' me a chance before goin' to the law and all—I decided to make a clean breast of everything and straighten everything out."

"Most men are willin' to do right, given the chance."

"Shore. Well, I aim to tell the truth. No use denyin' I broke jail in Texas after I'd been convicted of brand-blottin'. I ain't sorry I done it—broke jail, I mean. I was just a kid then, kind of wild mebbe, and eager for some easy money. I was guilty, but I just couldn't face ten years in the pen."

"I savvy how yuh felt."

"And I butchered four-five of yore steers." Bogart scuffed his boots over the floor again. "I was hard up and needed the money. Shore, I know it was poker and whisky that made me hard up, but there yuh are. I see things different now. I'm still hard up. But if yuh're willin' to give me a little time on them steers, I'll pay yuh every cent they're worth."

"Just forget about it, Sid," Johnny Pine said slowly. "It'll be worth a lot more'n them steers just to see yuh straighten up. Heck, what's a few steers? I can raise more!"

"You mean that?" Bogart looked up, grinning. "By gosh, Johnny, yuh're a real man. Things are goin' to be different between us from now on!"

"Bueno!" Johnny said heartily, and dumped bacon into a skillet. "You shore yuh ain't hungry?"

"Couldn't eat another bite." Bogart got suddenly to his feet. "But I'm a real biscuit maker if I do say it. Here—let me stir up that batter."

Johnny agreed, and Bogart rolled up his sleeves. All of Johnny Pine's supplies were on a shelf in a corner of the room. While Johnny watched the bacon, and fried potatoes, Bogart mixed a pan of batter. Bogart

kept up a running fire of talk, like a big load had been lifted from his mind.

In a very few minutes the steaming meal was ready and on the table. After Bogart had again declined to eat, Johnny pitched in. Sid Bogart sprawled in a chair and watched him. The man's sneering truculence of that afternoon had vanished altogether.

"Them biscuits all right?" he asked.

They were, in point of fact, slightly bitter. But Johnny said, "Swell! Must have got too much salt in these potatoes, though. They taste bitter."

Bogart said nothing. He looked out the window to hide the sly, triumphant light in his eyes. Johnny Pine continued to eat, but slower now. A puzzled look had come into his eyes and he looked a little sick.

"Somethin' wrong?" Bogart asked.

Johnny pushed back his plate.

"Stummick's kind of sizzlin' and burnin' inside. Reckon I ate too fast."

He grimaced, and gulped a drink of water.

"You look plumb pale," Bogart said anxiously. He got up and crossed to the table. "Reckon yuh got indigestion?"

"I—it don't feel like indigestion." Johnny doubled over suddenly, clutching at his stomach. "Seems like my insides are afire and all twisted up. Like—well, like that wolf I saw die from poisonin' two weeks ago must have felt."

"You don't reckon—"

"Poison—that's it! Sid, it was them biscuits that was bitter. You—didn't make a mistake, did you?"

"No, I didn't make a mistake!" Sid Bogart snarled, and suddenly he snatched Johnny's old six-shooter from its holster and backed away. "I done just what I meant to do, and yuh fell for it like a sap!"

Johnny twisted about in his chair, staring with dazed, pain-filled eyes up at Bogart.

"You—you mean—you ain't sorry for what you done?"

"Do I look like I'm sorry?" Bogart jeered. "I had to play like I was, though, to give you yore needin's."

"What'd you put in them biscuits?"

"I'll show you what I put in 'em!"

Bogart strode to the shelf and took down a tin can. From a tiny hole in the lid he poured a small amount of snowy-white, powdery substance into his palm.

"That's what you got a dose of!"

Johnny Pine looked with stunned eyes at the can—at the skull-and-cross-bones on its label and the black-type letters: WOLF POISON!

"You—you poisoned me!" the redhead moaned hoarsely. "You got to get me to a sawbones, Sid, quick."

"Have I?" Bogart sneered. "It wouldn't help yuh if I did. Wolf poison works fast. In ten minutes yuh'll be dead!"

"But why'd yuh do it, Sid?" Johnny was bent almost double now, clawing at his stomach. "I was just jokin' about them steers—and all the rest. I didn't aim to go to the sheriff."

"And I didn't aim for you to! But lyin' won't help you now, kid. Yuh'd have blabbed to the law, sooner or later. About the steers, and that Texas business. Then that long-nosed old sheriff would have started snoopin', and pretty soon he would have cottoned onto it bein' me that killed and robbed Bill Tully!"

Johnny stopped moaning. "You—you what?"

"Shore, it was me that done it," Sid Bogart jeered. "He reached for his gun and I let him have it. And now I'm puttin' you away too. That's why I rode over here. I didn't know just how I'd do it, until I saw that can of wolf poison there on the shelf. When yuh wasn't lookin', I slipped a good dose of that stuff into the bread batter. So it was kind of bitter, was it?"

Sid Bogart guffawed.

"You dirty, murderin' hound!" Johnny Pine grated harshly. "I'd like to—tear you apart!"

"But yuh won't. Mebbe tomorrer they'll find yuh here on the floor. They'll see this can of wolf poison on the table where I'll leave it, and they'll say, 'Pore Johnny, he was cookin' supper and got hold of the wrong can in the dark!' They won't suspect I had anythin' to do with it. Pretty slick, huh?"

JOHNNY PINE didn't answer. A groan was wrenched from his lips. His eyes seemed about to bulge from his head. He swayed sideward in the chair, clutched at the table, but his fingers slid off and he fell forward to the floor where he lay moaning.

Callously, with wicked satisfaction in his eyes, Bogart nudged him with the toe of his boot.

Then suddenly, with a startled curse, Bogart tried to leap backward. But he was too late. Johnny had grabbed hold of the boot, wrenched upward. Bogart slammed against

the floor with an impact that shook the cabin.

Snarling, he rolled over, trying to bring his gun into play. But Johnny had clawed to his knees, and now pounced on him like an infuriated wildcat. He hammered his fist into Bogart's face, driving the heavier man back against the floor. Bogart's head struck the boards with a dull thud. The gun fell from his hand.

Johnny grabbed for it, but in his eagerness only sent it skittering across the floor. Bogart reached up and grabbed him with his powerful arms. They rolled over and over. Bogart jammed an elbow against Johnny's throat, drove a knee into his stomach. He fought dirty, and got it back dirtier. For several minutes they fought savagely, mauling, biting, clawing.

Then Johnny Pine got up—and Bogart didn't. Bogart wasn't unconscious, but he was a battered, whimpering wreck. Johnny took his gun, picked up his own from the floor. "We both put on pretty good acts, didn't we, Sid?" he asked timidly.

"I—you tricked me," Bogart whined. "You wasn't poisoned."

"Not unless touchin' you poisons me! It's a fact, Sid, that yuh had me kind of fooled at first. But I was watchin' you when you got hold of that can with the wolf poison label on it. I saw yuh sneak it into the batter, and then I knew you was up to deviltry. So I decided to play yore game, figurin' that when you thought I was dyin' yu'd do some talkin'. And yuh did."

"If it wasn't poison in that can, what was it?" Bogart asked dazedly.

"Just plain bakin' soda," Johnny Pine said grimly. "And it didn't just happen to be there where you could get hold of it. When I saw yuh comin' a little while ago, I suspeced you were up to some trick. So I emptied my bakin' soda into that old empty wolf poison can, aimin' to test yuh out. If yuh tried to feed it to me, then I'd know yuh were a doublecrossin', murderin' snake. If yuh left it alone—well, no harm would be done.

"I gave you yore chance, Sid, the last one. Now yuh'll stand trial for something a lot worse than just butcherin' a few steers or brand-blottin'!"

Roundup of Best Western Fiction

IN NEXT month's WEST, we bring you the brand-new novel you've all been waiting for—a complete book-length ZORRO yarn! You'll find that A TASK FOR ZORRO, by Johnston McCulley, ably continues the tradition of the great fighting hidalgo, Don Diego Vega, in a yarn crowded with smashing action surprises! With flashing sword and cracking whip, Zorro challenges the evil might of sinister foemen—and the result's a masterpiece of narrative you'll never forget.

* * * * *

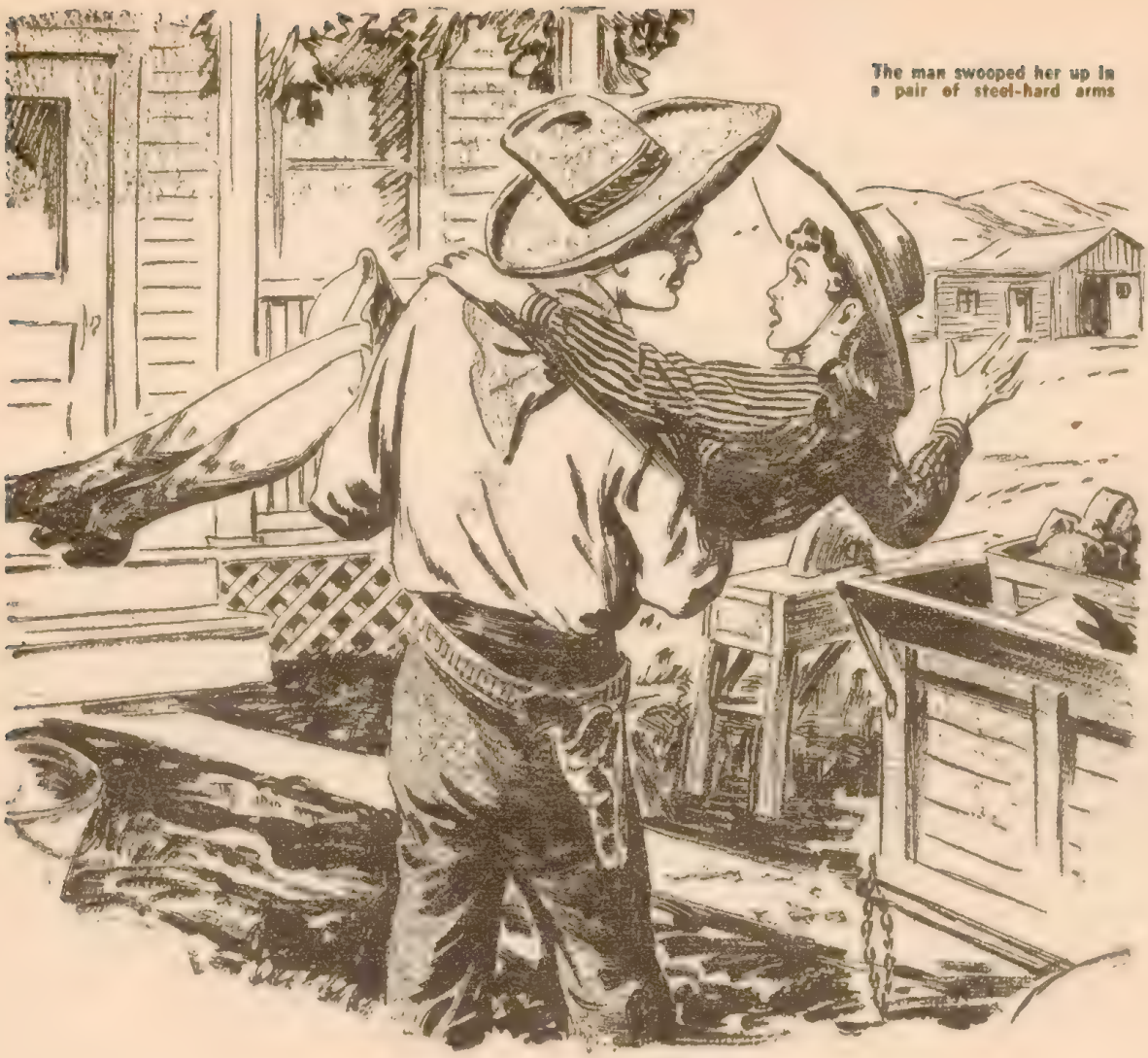
MORE big news for Western fans! The first issue of TRIPLE WESTERN is just out—featuring exciting novels by MAX BRAND, CLARENCE E. MULFORD and WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE. This magazine contains 196 pages of six-gun thrills and is a big quarter's worth.

* * * * *

AMONG the month's most entertaining novels is GHOST OF THE TUMBLING K, the complete Tombstone and Speedy yarn in the May issue of EXCITING WESTERN. When the rollicking range sleuths get busy in this one, the feathers fly in all directions!

* * * * *

FOR good reading, we also recommend the current issues of THRILLING WESTERN, THRILLING RANCH STORIES, POPULAR WESTERN, TEXAS RANGERS, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, THE RIO KID WESTERN, RODEO ROMANCES and RANGE RIDERS WESTERN—every one a winner! They're all now on sale at your favorite newsstand.



The man swooped her up in a pair of steel-hard arms

UNPREDICTABLE ARCHIE

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Archie Bellman of the Bell Ranch was a mystery man to everybody—but Nora Preston learned to understand him!

THE PN pickup swung around the last curve and there was Upper Valley parading its spring loveliness like a young girl conscious of her charm. Nora Preston drew a long breath and drank in the beauty of meadows soft green with newly springing grass, of rushing Teepee Creek loosed from icy winter's brutal clutch, of yellowish-green willows tufted with gray pussy-willow buds.

She had almost forgotten how achingly lovely was this part of the world, but she realized now how she had missed it. Now she had come back to Upper Valley, she never wanted to leave it. Probably she'd marry Milt Faxton, as he had so often begged

her, and thereby ultimately make the Prestons' PN and Milt's Bar F into the one great ranch in Upper Valley. But not until she had enjoyed her freedom a little longer.

She stepped down on the throttle and the car leaped ahead. It had passed the entrance to the Bar F, and another gate on the opposite side of the road, before a sense of something forgotten knocked at Nora's sub-conscious mind. The back of the pickup was heavy with supplies for the PN, and also some for this place, and she should leave them here now.

When Nora had gone away over a year ago to take her invalid mother to a more favorable climate—which, instead of helping her had apparently hastened Mrs. Preston's death—this had been part of Milt Faxton's Bar F. But he had leased it soon after to Archie Bellman, who, according to a sign swinging from the top bar of the gate, had called it the Bell Ranch.

Impatient at the delay which delivering the supplies would cause her, Nora backed the car, shot through the gate and up a muddy road toward the ranch buildings. At the kitchen end of a sprawling log house, she braked the pickup abruptly and the car turned completely around. The warm sun of the past few days had been drawing the frost out of the gumbo soil, leaving it soft and slippery as butter.

Her nerves somewhat jangled, the girl looked for a place to unload the supplies. But except for a short plank walk leading from the kitchen door to a hillside cellar and a milk house, there was nothing but mud.

"Darn!" exploded Nora.

That Archie person ought to be around somewhere. Yet he couldn't really be blamed if he wasn't, for when Daddy Preston had gone to town to meet Nora, he'd learned that, due to floods, the train was almost a day late. He couldn't wait, so he'd filled the pickup with supplies, borrowed a horse to ride home, and left the car for Nora.

Nora honked violently. A couple of sleepy cats sunning themselves against the door, and chickens busily scratching in the dirt remained the only signs of life. It looked as if she'd have to do the job. She jumped out of the car and managed to keep on the walk until she reached the rear of the machine. But when she tried to pull out bulky packages, her foot slipped, and she herself was skidding in the mud.

Since she hadn't been able to avoid this mishap, she might as well go ahead and unload the stuff. But the more she tugged at things, the deeper went her shoes. Then she heard a nice voice say,

"Why such a yank, young lady? The way you've parked your car, you'll drop all that stuff if you're not careful. I've seen ranch girls a-plenty who could back a truck and unload it 'most as good as a man."

Nora stared at a tanned young man whose long legs were carrying him swiftly in her direction. He was far from handsome, yet his dancing blue eyes and humorous mouth were most attractive. However, because she had had all this trouble, Nora was pretty cross with Archie Bellman.

"If the ground around here wasn't like grease, and there had been any decent place for me to unload your stuff, I wouldn't have had a bit of trouble," she retorted. "And if you'd been on hand, as you should have been, I wouldn't have ruined my shoes, either!" She ruefully pulled up one slender foot and all but lost her shoe in the mud.

"What a brute I've been!" replied the man, his amused blue eyes admiring the girl's lovely, distressed face. "Part of that we'll remedy instantly." And before Nora guessed what was about to happen, he swooped her up in a pair of steel-hard, though gentle arms, and carried her to the house.

KICKING open the door, he marched into the kitchen, bright and clean and surprisingly orderly, yet rather forlorn by reason of lack of a feminine touch such as curtains at the windows or flower pots on the sills.

"Sit here," he ordered gayly, depositing her on a big table. "You must never be able to say that Archie Bellman let the prettiest girl under the sun spoil her little shoes unloading his groceries. I did come as fast as I could," he said, rummaging in a cupboard at one side of the room. "I heard the horn, but I happened to be down at the river, fixing the water hole for stock I keep in the stable corral. You shouldn't have been in such a yank," he added with a grin.

"I'm in a big hurry to get home," answered Nora. "I called Daddy before I left town and said I'd be out as fast as the pickup could make it. He'll think I got lost, or had a breakdown or something."

"Don't you know your dad better'n that?" asked Archie, bringing a can of shoe polish, a brush and a rag. "Here, let me have your

shoes," and he slipped them from her feet. "David Preston doesn't get churned up that easy. He allows for emergencies—like this one."

Nora looked around the room, and into the adjoining one.

"Milt used to let some of his cowboys stay here when they were working on this part of the Bar F," she said. "It had become terribly rundown, but you've done wonders already. It would be really charming if it was fixed up."

"You mean the way you'd do it?" Archie asked, skilfully manipulating polish and brush. "I'm sure of it. I'd like to have you do it, too. . . Here are your shoes. Do you know you've got the prettiest little feet? I could be a good bootblack if I didn't prefer to be a rancher, couldn't I?"

"They look like new," admired Nora. She was about to jump from the table, when, for a second time, Archie's strong arms lifted her and held her to him.

"Let me down!" she stormed, furious that she liked being taken into his arms. "I can walk perfectly."

"I can't take chances on your getting your shoes muddy again," he said coolly, undisturbed by her show of anger. "I haven't time to clean them again."

"How very rude you are!" Nora explained, pushing against the circle of his embrace.

She had lifted her face to his, in protest, and something in his expression suddenly made her catch her breath, and start her heart pounding against her side. For a fleeting, ecstatic moment Archie's lips were on hers before he set her gently on her feet.

"Get into the truck while I unload the rest of the stuff," he ordered, as matter-of-factly as if that last moment had meant nothing.

Something *had* happened, however. Something Nora was not going to forget easily; the recollection of which brought color flaming to her usually cool, colorless cheeks. Yet to show anger would, she feared, merely feed the egotism of this Archie person. Much better ignore the incident as of no consequence —and see that he never had another opportunity!

"All done," announced Archie. "The rest of the packages are for the PN. . . . Here, I'll turn the car around for you." He gently pushed Nora from under the steering wheel.

"You needn't stay after we get to the road," she said crisply. "I won't have to watch for any more slick places. . . . Just to the road!" she said more sharply as the pickup roared through the gate and headed toward the PN.

"I want to see your dad about using one of his teams for a few days," was the imperturbable reply. "Besides—I want to spend every blessed second with you that I can." He flashed her a swift glance that again made her catch her breath and wonder why her heart should jump so crazily.

When the pickup raced into the yard at the PN, it was no surprise to Nora to see Milt Faxton come out of the house with her father. That heavy, indolent young man had a habit of spending all the hours possible at the Preston ranch. Before the death of his father, who, like David Preston, had built up a big outfit, he had concerned himself as little as possible with running the Bar F. He had the same foreman and most of the crew who had been on in Ben Faxton's lifetime, and was satisfied with their reports.

To judge from his expression it was a distinct and unpleasant surprise to Milt to see Archie jump out of the truck and lift Nora to the ground in a deliberately proprietary manner, as if they two were coming home together. Milt's heavy features reddened and three long steps brought him almost up against Archie. Although Nora was now in her father's arms, listening to his affectionate welcome, she nevertheless heard Milt's arrogant voice.

"Keep your hands off my girl, Bellman, unless you want to get into big trouble! In fact, keep away from her—always!"

ARCHIE returned the black look with a grin both impudent and tantalizing.

"Only when you've proved your words, big boy." He shrugged. "Right now I'm serving notice that I'm giving you a run for your money. It'll be the real thing, and no fooling."

Without waiting for Milt's reply, he turned to David Preston, his manner toward the older man a mixture of respect and warm liking.

"Mind if I take your big team of grays for a few days, Mr. Preston? My upper ditch needs some work, and I want to haul out some building logs besides. My horses are too green and wild to be depended on for those jobs."

Before the older man could answer, Milt cut in.

"Regular little moocher, ain't you, Bellman? How many special privileges you entitled to, you think? Use your own horses! You got plenty."

"And you know, Faxton," retorted Archie. "why I can't use my horses for that sort of work. You sold 'em to me; said they were well broken, when you knew they were anything but."

"You boys'll stay for dinner?" invited David Preston, hearing the cook's lusty pounding on an iron triangle which summoned a quartet of cowboys with slicked-down hair and still damp faces.

Milt waited for Archie to answer first, and Archie did so promptly.

"I wasn't hanging around for you to ask me, Mr. Preston. But I'll not turn down the invitation."

Milt glowered.

"Thanks, Dave," he said pointedly to the older man. "Nothing I'd like more. But you and Nora must have lots to talk about just between yourselves. I'll come over later. Sure swell to have you home again, Nora. And don't forget you and me've lots to talk over, too."

"That," remarked Archie, nodding toward Milt's departing figure, and ignoring the implied rebuke, "is what's known as cutting one's nose to spite his face! I don't hate my face that bad. Nor my stomach, either," he added, chuckling. . . .

"Well, my dear, what do you think of him?" David Preston asked his daughter on Archie's departure, an hour later. "Sort of different, ain't he?"

"He's unusual—and unpredictable," she said, hoping her color didn't betray something she was as yet unwilling to admit even to herself. "He's good fun, but he does seem to have what's called 'plenty of gall.'"

"In some ways, yes. But it's because he knows what he wants and goes after it by the shortest possible method." David Preston smiled. "He certainly has got in Milt's hair. Milt won't acknowledge it, but Bellman can ride rings around Milt in all kinds of work, and has far better understanding of ranch and range problems. Milt growls and says, 'Bellman asks for an inch, and then he takes a mile.' Perhaps he does, but the inches are warranted."

He hadn't even asked for the inch which he'd developed into a mile on their first meeting, thought Nora, and she resolved to treat him with cool reserve. Yet the memory of his kiss and the gentle, yet possessive manner in which he had held her caused her to wonder whether she'd be prepared for his unexpectedness!

Nora did not see Archie the one time he came, which was to return her father's horses. Nor did he on this occasion try to see her, as far as she could discover without asking her father outright. This irritated her more than she'd admit, and to soothe her feeling of neglect, she showed more than her usual friendliness toward the complacently ubiquitous Milt.

"The Parkers are throwing a big party this Saturday night," Milt announced the Monday evening following Archie's appearance at the PN. "You and me'll take it in, girlie. It'll knock everybody's eyes out to see what a beaut my girl is. Okay, Nora?"

"It'll probably be all right," Nora replied cautiously. "Yet something might come up to interfere." Though she wasn't going to count on the possibility that Archie might ask her, still she wanted some leeway if he did!

"Nothing'll interfere," Milt said confidently. "Nothing a-tall."

All week long, Nora was strangely restless. Then at breakfast on Saturday morning, she asked her father a question.

"Daddy, you've been wanting to find out about grazing prospects on the reserve before deciding on the cattle to take up there, haven't you? I've not forgotten what you taught me, and I can ride up there today and look around, if you like. It'll save your time."

Happy at the prospect of a long ride which should help overcome her unrest of mind and spirit, Nora started immediately. She took a trail through the pines which paralleled Teepee Creek most of the way, and for some time she had been riding slowly, enjoying the quiet beauty of the forest, when voices attracted her attention.

Looking toward the creek, which here was some distance below the trail, she saw two horsemen. One was Milt Faxton, heavy and awkward in his saddle as always. The other was Archie Bellman, and Nora's heart-beat involuntarily quickened. Contrasted with Archie's expert ease, Milt's poor horsemanship was more than ever noticeable.

MILT'S voice was angry and quarrelsome.

"I'll show you you can't take any inches when it comes to water, Bellman," he was

shouting. "Had my s'picions when you borrowed Dave Preston's horses to work on your ditch. Still, I sure was flabbergasted when I found you'd cut off part of the water for my ditch to get all of it in yours."

It was hard to see through the trees, yet Nora managed to catch a glimpse of Archie's face. He was cool and contemptuous and undisturbed, like his reply.

"Show me where I cut off the flow in your ditch! No water's coming through my ditch but what my lease allows. How you would like to find something to prove I'm a low-down cheat, like you're always insinuating!"

"You've said it, fellow! And right now I aim to show you up on one count."

Nora judged they had now reached the location of the headgate of the main Bar F ditch, for Milt was pointing and shouting.

"Lookit! Just half the water's comin' through the ditch as ought to, 'cause you're stealin' it!"

"Oh, shut your yapping!" said Archie. "Haven't you lived here long enough to know something about beavers—especially in spring? Look at that dam across your ditch. Tear it out and you'll have more water than your ditch will carry."

"Just the same," raged Milt, his anger increased because he had made his accusations before he had real foundation for them. "Just the same, I bet you're up to somethin' shady." He dismounted and unfastened a shovel tied to his saddle. "Help me dig this out, Bellman," he ordered crossly.

"Not me," said Archie cheerfully. "You'll say I'm in cahoots with the beavers."

Milt wheeled, raising the spade in a threat. In doing so, he let the bridle rein drop, and his horse, frightened by the brandished implement, snorted and dashed away toward home.

Milt seemed about to choke, but evidently he sputtered something, for Nora heard Archie answer him.

"Not on this bronc, you don't! He won't carry double. Do you good to walk home. It will cool you off. . . . So long."

Nora rode on thoughtfully, debating whether she wanted to marry a man whom she had just seen exhibit such disagreeable, not to say nasty, characteristics!

It was noon when she returned home and reported to her father. Sometime later, while she was reading, she heard a car clatter up to the house. It was the reddest of red roadsters, and the driver was that unpredictable young man who was so much in her thoughts. Archie was at the door before Nora had decided how to act toward him.

"Lucky me!" he said, regarding her with ardent approval. "Come on over to my place, won't you, lovely, and do a little job for me? You look all right as you are. That bluey-gray sweater and gray slacks are exactly right for your gold hair and mother-of-pearl-tinted cheeks."

"But I have to get ready for the dance at the Parkers'," she demurred. "And it's four o'clock now."

"Now don't you worry, that gas wagon of mine will get over the ground in no time. . . . You're wondering about the color?" he asked as if reading her thoughts. "It's so no one can make any mistake about who's coming."

In spite of herself Nora laughed and found herself walking toward the flaming red roadster. . . .

"The job?" asked Nora curiously, when for a second time she was in the big, shining kitchen of Archie's house. "Not scrubbing, I hope!"

"Curtains at the windows!" said Archie. Then in answer to her look of surprise, "Yes, I want my house prettied up some. Aim to make it a real mansion soon as I can. Hauled out a lot of swell building logs with your dad's team, and later I'll want your advice about the addition I aim to build."

Archie had bought ready-made curtains; pretty, ruffled curtains that Nora enjoyed fitting to the shining, small-paned windows. Yet there were still a few to finish when Nora suddenly noticed that the evening shadows were falling long across the floor.

"I didn't guess it could be so late," she said anxiously. "Milt will be coming for me before I can get my supper and get dressed."

"I'll fix up some chuck for us in a jiff," said Archie, very well satisfied with affairs, to judge from his tone. "I sort of hoped you'd forget time, because I wanted to have you eat here—just with me, alone. It kind of gives me an idea of how it will be when my dream comes true. Do your dreams come true, Nora?" he asked lightly, as, unopposed, he started to bustle around getting the meal ready.

He produced from here and there cold sliced ham, big hard rolls, ripe tomatoes and crisp lettuce, jelly and pickles and potato chips. He added a big thermos jug and a fat pitcher of cream to the other things.

"Here's a gallon of hot coffee," he said.

"Can't afford to have friend Milt say I tired you out so you went to sleep on his hands. Sit up and eat, pal, and then I'll take you to the PN in plenty time to doll up for the blowout."

IN THE fun of this impromptu meal, Nora forgot her momentary irritation over Archie's allowing her so nearly to miss her date for the evening. She was having such a good time that, to be truthful, she almost wished she hadn't promised to go to the party.

They dawdled over the meal longer than Nora had intended, and she was saying, "You'll have to step on the gas to get me home in time," when they heard hasty steps pound along the plank walk, and the screen door was flung open.

Milt Faxton stood in the doorway, his face sending the sunlight into temporary eclipse.

"Oh, hello, Faxton," greeted Archie affably. "Pull up a stool. We're just through, but there's still plenty to eat."

"You mean *you're* through," sputtered Milt, evidently finding words difficult. "I've stood all of your gall I intend to, Bellman. Your lease is up in three weeks. I won't renew it! You can get out."

Archie smiled thinly, and Nora wished uneasily that she was somewhere else.

"There's still the option, perhaps you recall?"

"Option!" Milt glared at Archie. "You can't take up any option! You sunk all the dinero you possessed when you took the lease and bought horses and cattle and machinery and the rest of the stuff here. Don't think I'll buy 'em back, either. I wouldn't give you a crooked nickel after this! Nora's *my* girl. Nobody else's."

"That so?" asked Archie, his tone and manner indifferent, but contradicted by a meaning wink and a flash of understanding at the girl. "I gave you warning about that the day I first met Nora."

Nora tried to hide the mounting color in her cheeks as she marched to the door.

"If we're going to the Parkers', I must get ready," she said.

With a muttered word about Archie, Milt grudgingly followed her.

Archie did not come to the door, and Nora remembered that she hadn't thanked him for the supper. Nor, for that matter, had he thanked her, directly, for her help with his curtains. . . .

Most of Nora's thoughts the next few days were concerned with Archie Bellman, despite her stout mental assertions that she really didn't care.

If he left the Bell, where would he go? Would he pass out of the picture and never see her again? Did his hints and his actions toward her mean nothing, after all?

Milt announced to David Preston that he was "kickin' Bellman out of Upper Valley," but he received no commendation from the older man. When he boasted of it to Nora she spoke her mind vehemently.

"It looks as if you're scared he'll outsmart you, or you'd let him stay and beat him in fair fight!"

Milt had turned sulky, and tried to take her in his arms.

"I don't aim to have a bounder in Upper Valley who likes my girl the way Bellman likes you," he had said. "Even after you are Mrs. Faxton."

"Well, that is something I've not decided yet," returned Nora calmly. "In fact, I may decide never to be your wife."

"Sure you will, after that fellow's gone," retorted Milt crossly.

A week passed, during which Nora kept hoping that Archie wasn't going to disappoint her faith in his resourcefulness by giving up as Milt expected. Nora couldn't stand the uncertainty any longer, so she rode to the Bell Ranch.

The place seemed as deserted as that first memorable day when she had practically skidded into Archie's arms. But after a couple of "Halloos" Archie strolled around the house from the direction of the creek. His unruly reddish hair was damp against his temples, and his hands showed that he had been working in the dirt.

"Hello, lovely," he greeted, his eyes caressing her. His hands reached up and took her gently from her saddle, and he held her close and kissed her lightly, though warmly.

She should have left immediately. But she didn't because she was too interested in Archie's future. Milt had told her that Archie had not approached him with any proposition—"Reckon he knows that he's taken his last inch," Milt had boasted. "Knows now I'm no easy mark."

She freed herself from Archie's embrace.

"Since you'll be leaving Upper Valley so soon," she said, "Dad thought perhaps you'd be selling some of your stock. He'd like to buy Decatur Rex."

Archie teased her with mischievous eyes.

"If I decide to sell, I'll let your dad have the bull. . . . I've a question I want to ask you, Nora."

Her pulses quickened. Was this unpredictable individual about to ask her to marry him? His next words were indeed a question, but a still more surprising question than the one Nora had anticipated.

"Can you cook?"

"Of course I can cook!" she answered, disappointment that she wouldn't admit giving sharpness to her voice.

"I know I shouldn't have asked, but I had to be really sure. Now, one more question." By this time Nora wouldn't let herself anticipate anything romantic! "Will you come over here day after tomorrow and fix up a bang-up dinner? I'll have all the stuff you'll need. I could cook it myself, but you'd do it so much better, and so much more—oh, I s'pose the word would be 'elegantly.'"

"That's a—a queer thing to ask. Is it necessary?"

"It may affect my whole future," he said solemnly. "And yours, too. Is it a go?"

Curiosity killed a cat, Nora had often heard, and although she was no cat, she had her share of curiosity!

"If it will really help you out, I'll come. It's to be sort of a farewell dinner?"

"Farewell? No, not exactly. Then I can count on you?" he asked eagerly.

THE next twenty-four hours Nora spent alternately resolving she'd not go to the Bell ranch, and deciding she'd be darned selfish if she didn't. After breakfast of that morning, her mind was made up.

"Archie wants me to show him how to cook some special things," she said to her father, "and since he's going away so soon, I couldn't say no."

David Preston chuckled. "It's my impression he doesn't believe that anyone's 'no' sticks unless he agrees with it. He's got Milt all hot and bothered because he's made no move to get off the Bell. Milt expected to see Archie slink away, and he goes on about his business as if he had no intention of leaving."

"There's no other place around here he can get, is there?" asked the girl. "And if he can't take up the option he has to go?"

David Preston walked to the door. "That's right. Yet I'll not be surprised at any rabbit he pulls out of a hat!"

This morning Archie was on the lookout for Nora.

"How festive everything looks!" she exclaimed when he opened the door for her. "The curtains help a lot, and you've done something a man seldom thinks of—putting flowers all over the house."

"Looks as if a lovely lady might live here, doesn't it?" he said. "That's the way it should look. And the dinner you'll cook will just complete the illusion. I'm your chief assistant, remember, so give orders and I'll obey, for I don't aim to tire you all out, my sweet."

Nora always enjoyed cooking, yet never had she enjoyed it more than preparing this meal. Archie was more than a right hand; he was also feet, and in addition he provided constant entertainment. A big roast was in the oven, biscuits were in a pan ready to be baked, peas and turnips boiled on the stove, and everything was in readiness. In the pantry were custard pies and fruit salad and chocolate cake, all of them "delectable" according to Archie.

"Show me how to fix the knives and forks, so they'll be in the right places," he asked after he had spread a gay, flowered cloth on the table.

"Put them this way," said Nora, giving directions. "But why so many? Are you expecting extra company?"

"You bet I am, and here they come! . . . Please don't be surprised at anything, Nora. Please! Just back my hand if it needs backing."

He dashed from the house, and a moment later returned with two older men. They were strangers to Nora, but evidently old acquaintances of Archie's. They were laughing and talking when Archie ushered them into the house, where they stopped still at sight of the pretty girl, busy with the last-minute details of the dinner.

"Nora," said Archie, "this is my uncle-in-law, Mr. Bennett Orr, and a friend of his, Mr. Harry Hills. They're from Belt City, where I originally hailed from. Uncle Bennett, Harry, this is Nora, the light of my life."

Flattering remarks from the two men, and Nora, bewildered, and decidedly upset by the inference they had gained from Archie's introduction, smiled faintly and went on with last-minute preparations. Archie gave efficient help, but he took part in an animated, noisy conversation, giving Nora no oppor-

tunity to demand an explanation.

At last they all sat down to the table.

"I'm waiting on all of us, as Nora's done enough," Archie announced.

This quite met Uncle Bennett's approval.

In fact, it was increasingly evident that he was favorably impressed by all he heard and saw. Nora found herself liking him immensely, and talked to him enthusiastically about the wonders of Upper Valley. Several times she was on the point of telling him more—things which would set him straight on her being here today—when a significant glance from Archie stopped her, increasing her curiosity about the how-come of these visitors.

The answer came after they had finished their coffee, and the visitors, amiable and contented, had lighted their pipes. Uncle Bennett smiled at the two young people.

"If Harry here agrees with me," he said, indicating his companion, "we'll take up the option for you, Archie." Mr. Hills nodded, and Uncle Bennett went on. "We agree that when a young fellow's got the git-up-and-git you've showed on this spread, and best of all has got himself a wonderful little sweetheart like Nora, he deserves a boost. To tell the truth, my boy, I didn't believe you'd stick. Thought backing you would be burning up money, and neither Harry nor I burn money we've worked hard to get."

NOW was the time for Nora to speak out. "I'm not Archie's sweetheart! I'm just—" Well, what was she? "He's never asked me—" That wasn't the way to say it! It sounded like bidding for a proposal.

"I know a love match when I see it," laughed Harry Hills. "If you two ain't made for each other I never saw two who were. . . . Yes, we'll take up your option, Archie. Gladly."

"In fact," added Bennett Orr, "I'll give you the canceled note for a wedding present. How's that, young lady? How's that, my boy?"

Before either could say a word, Nora heard a well-known step at the doorway. There was a loud, demanding knock, and a minute later, Milt Faxton charged into the room. Disregarding the strangers, he bulked threateningly over Archie.

"I'm goin' to beat you up proper this time, Bellman," he barked. "You've taken your last inch in Upper Valley. When I finish with you—"

"Sure," answered Archie amiably. "Let's finish things. Only let's go outside. I don't want my house mussed up."

"*Your* house!" bellowed Milt. "*My* house, you mean! But outdoors is all right. You hustle out to the car, Nora," he said sharply. "This ain't the place for you!"

"Oh, Faxton," said Archie. "Meet my uncle, Bennett Orr, and his friend, Harry Hills. My uncle's giving me the option on the Bell for a wedding present." He looked at Nora. "Won't you stay here, Nora? I won't be long, and then I've got to ask you something—something mighty important."

"Are you comin' or not?" shouted Milt, and he stamped out of the house, followed by the other three men.

Nora still sat at the table, where, from her place, she could see the yard. Like most of her sex, she hated fights, yet this time she was so interested in the outcome that she had to watch.

Milt lunged at Archie like a bomber, all the weight of his heavy body behind his blow. Archie had not expected such a violent attack, and the blow glanced off the side of his head, leaving him more than a little dizzy. The trouble, apparently, was that Archie hadn't got mad enough! But the blow changed this, and in a flash he shed his indolent indifference. Light on his feet, and more skilled in boxing than Milt, he danced around his opponent, avoiding Milt's flailing arms and sending home punches that hurt.

It wasn't long before Milt was so groggy that a well-aimed blow laid him down. Archie might have kept him down, but instead he moved away, tucked in his shirt and straightened his disheveled hair.

Nora heard him say, "Just see he gets started for his place, will you, Uncle Bennett? And don't disturb Nora and me for at least ten minutes."

He had told her he had "important business" with her, and suddenly she felt queer and frightened. But a second later he was in the room, and she was in his arms, where she now felt she belonged.

"Now I can ask you what's been ready to pop out for so long that keeping it back has 'most choked me," he declared. "I couldn't ask you to marry me when I hadn't anything more certain than an option on this place. I had to get Uncle Bennett on my side, and I knew I couldn't do that unless I could make him believe I was ready to settle

(Concluded on page 106)

A White Phantom Story

The buck bounded high and buckled in mid leap, as the rifle shot reverberated through the valley

THE GRIM VALLEY

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Tuk Cramer knows deviltry is afoot, and Olak senses it—and their combined efforts balk a base, vicious scheme!

OLAK, the White Phantom wolf king, blew dry snow particles from his nostrils as he ran the rim of a gulch in the Valley of Forgotten Men. Now and then the fumes from a near-by hot sulphur spring caused him to snuffle sharply.

This indeed was a strange country, a place of many contradictions. On the one side, Olak was flanked by gaunt, frost-tortured tamaracks which cracked like the snapped bones of sere skeletons. On the other side steam could be seen to rise from the hot springs.

It was in the hot springs area that, in spite of full winter elsewhere, grass showed in places—fodder for the timorous cloven-

hoofed creatures of the hinterland, deer and moose.

Olak ran with keen desire as the trail of the young buck he chased freshened. Back at the lair zone Sanyek, the beautiful silvery black mate of Olak, nursed a new brood. She depended on her lordling mate, Olak, to supply her with food, and in all the wilds no male wildling accepted his share of the responsibilities attending parenthood with more sagacity and hunting service than Olak.

He now glimpsed his quarry. Hard-blown, the young buck was running a hogback ridge. Instinctively Olak cut sharply to left. He reached the bottom of a long draw, along which he stretched to head the buck off.

Now he glimpsed the mule deer. He had shortened the distance between them to around a hundred yards. But suddenly, on a short rise of land, the young buck halted, freezing. Olak hurricaned on, but all at once he skidded to a halt, sending up a gout of snow spume as a rifle shot crashed. The little buck bounded high, buckled in mid leap and fell to his right flank on the snow, kicking only feebly as death had already stopped his heart beat.

It was then that Olak caught the baying sound of dog creatures. And then he glimpsed a man creature. Man had cheated the White Phantom of his kill and was hurrying toward him.

Olak's hackles rose as he peeled his lips across his terrible fangs. He quivered in every muscle and nerve, for the coming of this stranger man creature to his range foreboded evil.

The echoing reverberations of the single rifle shot still persisted along the valley. The sound carried back to the cabins of the man creatures at the springs, those humans Olak knew so well. They were Tuk Cramer and his lovely young Indian wife Netan. There was also Tan, Netan's youthling brother and then Lal, the beautiful white girl, and Netan and Tuk's infant son.

TUK was working with Tan at the compounds where Tan raised his foxes. Tuk suddenly started, shaking his head from side to side.

"Ayaie!" he gasped. "You heard the shot, brave one?" Tuk spoke in the Cree Indian language.

"I heard, Tuk," said Tan. "One of the stranger men who called last night. Let us hope that they will not kill Olak, or Sanyek."

"O-o-ou-u-u-u-u-u-u-u—"

Tan was cut short by the long wail of the White Phantom now disturbed by the presence of the dog creatures at the camp of the strange men.

Tuk looked sharply at Tan.

"That is the white one," he clucked. "All is well with him." But Tuk's face was clouded.

Tuk had felt uncomfortable in the presence of the little man who, in company with a burly dog musher, had called at the cabin the previous night. This man had eyes which penetrated sharply. As Tuk had explained to Netan when the outfit had moved on.

"In his eyes, I see an evil spirit, Netan. He spoke of bones, of skeletons, of forgotten men. Ayaie! Lal's father was such a one. He searched for skeletons in the gulches, but he was a good one. This other—ayah! I cannot say!"

Tuk had not wanted to alarm Netan. The little man, who called himself Professor Appleby, had told Tuk that Corporal Dan Martin, of the Mounted, had directed him to Tuk's cabin. Appleby arranged with Tuk and Tan to help cut logs for the erection of two small shacks.

He intended to stay one year in the grim valley, searching for bones and relics through which to establish a link with the first aboriginal natives of North America, he had announced, but Tuk had not understood all the stranger had said.

The little man had brought no signed credentials from Corporal Martin, who was a great friend of the Cramers. So Tuk's heart was heavy, heavy with concern for his family and for the safety of Olak, the White Phantom, and his kindred.

Netan's large, soft sloe-like eyes had widened as she shared Tuk's concern. Tonight, as she sat nursing her thriving infant son, she talked softly to Tuk.

"I think, great one," she said, "we had better leave the wild valley. We have been here long. You have enough gold now to keep us closer to the settlements at the Outside. Now that we have this little one, Dan, we should move. Always there comes someone or something to frighten us here."

Tuk Cramer took time in replying. He knew that Netan was right, and yet here in the valley, the range of Olak, there was great wealth for them. The hunting and trapping, normally, were good. Tan had established his fox breeding and raising and shortly

would deliver to the market either pelts or live foxes of a breed so beautiful they would astonish the big buyers.

Yet, with his mind charged with the superstitions of his maternal Indian ancestors, Tuk feared the valley. He feared the sharp-eyed little man who had come to search for the bones of man creatures long since dead. Ayaie!

Tuk shuddered. He glanced down at the lovely infant son now well fed and asleep against Netan's heart.

"I promised the little man I would help build the cabins, Netan," Tuk intoned at last. "We shall watch closely and if there is sign of trouble, of danger, we go! Ayaie! but it will be hard to leave the White Phantom, the beaver. It will be hard to leave all the hunting places."

Tuk bowed his head in a great sorrow. Tomorrow, at sunrise, he and Tan would report to the strangers for duty. Tuk intended to speed up the work of building and then he would leave the professor and his big companion to their own devices, while Tuk stayed closely by his home range to watch and to hope that all would go well.

The rifle shot had not bothered him too much since he had later heard Olak call. He realized that men must perforce hunt and kill deer for fresh meat from time to time, but Tuk disliked strange shooting on this wild range, especially at any point so close to the lair of Sanyek. She must now be nursing her new whelps. Then, there were those savage-looking dogs, big huskies and malamutes—part wolf, some of them.

So long as the man creatures kept their sled dogs enclosed and adequately fed with fish from the near-by lakes, all might be well, but if the creatures were permitted to run loose, ayaie! Tuk Cramer shuddered. He was thinking of the White Phantom and kindred. . . .

WITH the help of the big man who was called Pete Manjelle, Tuk and Tan quickly built the two squat log shacks. Tuk was not pleased with the site chosen by the professor. But he shrugged off his fears as he thought of the little man's project. Tan, however, was restive, nervous. He scarcely spoke on their way back to the home area. Both Tuk and Netan remarked the change which had come over the youth.

Today, as they snowshoed up to put the finishing touches to the pole roof of the main cabin, Tuk halted abruptly. He turned sharply to Tan and caught him by a shoulder.

"Something bothers you, brave one," Tuk said softly. "What now? Is it the lovely white flower?"

Tuk was afraid that young Tan had again started to moon over Lal. The young folk were very fond of each other, but had mutually agreed against marriage. Tan was a full-blooded Indian.

"It is not Lal, Tuk. I—I do not care to make talk about it. You will think I have been in league with evil spirits." Tan looked up, his soft glance meeting the sharper light spilling from Tuk's eyes as the older man started.

"Evil spirits, Tan? You have seen, heard something?"

Tan broke down. He nodded.

"It was when the big one called Pete moved supplies from the cariole to the log storehouse we built for them, Tuk. I saw him carry in a sack of steel traps. Ayaie! What would bone hunter want with steel traps?"

A slow smile toyed with Tuk's mouth corners. He squeezed Tan's shoulder warmly, as if relieved by Tan's statement.

"Pete, the big one, is not a professor, brave one," he said softly. "Ayaie! Why should he not trap? He is the trapper kind. While the little one hunts for bones and old cooking pots and such things, Pete will lay his sets for foxes. There is nothing to fear in that, so long as he keeps off our marked traplines."

Tan's underlip was caught in his teeth. For a long moment he stood in silence, then suddenly he started, reaching inside his buckskin jacket. He drew out a dirtied envelope from which he extracted a folding card, a card which bore a picture—the likeness of a man.

Tuk seized the card and gazed steadily at the picture without understanding. It was the likeness of a rather large, but kindly, smiling man face. But Tuk could not read the wording on the card. He looked to Tan for enlightenment.

"What is this, brave one?" he asked "Where did you get it?"

"It dropped from a box of supplies Pete carried. I have had it two days, Tuk. I hold it some time before I even show it to Lal, who can read." The boy's eyes were wide and seemed to hold a trapped expression of fear.

"Go on, Tan," Tuk urged. "You are not

a weakling squaw, but a brave hunter. What does this writing say?"

"It says that this picture likeness is that of Professor Appleby, of the United States. The card is what Lal calls identification papers which gives the man permission to enter and work in Canada, here at the Valley of Forgotten men. Lal says there can be no mistake. If this man of the likeness is Professor Appleby, then, great one, who is this other, this little man whose eyes are the eyes of a devil?"

"Nom d' un chien!" Tuk swore softly in French. "Does Netan know this?"

Tan shook his head.

"Lal says it is best Netan should not know. Twice in the night I have come up to this man camp to watch, to listen. You are not angry, great one?"

Tuk made no immediate reply. He shook with nervous reaction. These strangers were dangerous impostors. He was filled with misgiving, realizing that the men had gained possession of the real Professor Appleby's outfit.

"It is bad, Tan," Tuk breathed. "It is bad because Caporal Martin has just completed his patrol of our country and might not come again for mebbe a year. Ayaie! We must watch. If what Lal says is right, then there is much evil in these men. There is danger for us, if we do not watch closely. Come now. We go. We finish our work and never let them know what we have found out."

TUK and Tan finished their work to the complete satisfaction of the little man, who rubbed his hands and praised their efforts.

"An excellent work, my friends," he chuckled. "And now you think of your pay, yes?"

Tuk nodded.

"Ah, yes, of course. The laborer is always worthy of his hire. In due time you will receive your money from my Society. I will send a signed voucher for the amount down to them."

"But, d' money, *msieu,*" Tuk said.

He did not understand this man's talk. It was the big man Pete who cut in to help Tuk. Pete Manjelle, to Tuk's amazement, spoke some Cree.

"What the little one means," he said to Tuk, "is that your pay will come from the Outside. He will send in a signed paper asking them to send you the money. You understand?"

Tan secretly touched Tuk's arm. The older man nodded, forcing a thin smile.

Together they turned and moved off, but not before Tuk had seen the big musher cast a smile, attended by a wink, at his smaller companion. . . .

With the spring's true borning, when freshets galloped madly in their race to the creeks or parent rivers and lakes, when the gray geese honked high in the sky as they headed to the farther north, and when in every thicket there was new life, Tuk Cramer neglected a lot of his regular routine work.

He stayed with Tan at the fox compounds, where nervous vixens cowered in terror because the tang of the man creatures' dogs permeated the wilderness.

In due time, Tuk moved north to his beaver creek and small lake. He had husbanded his beaver colonies well since he had first noted sign, some seasons ago, of the arrival of the first beaver colonists. More than once in the past recent years, predators had taken a heavy toll of the beavers, and once a sneaking poacher had all but cleared out the beaver area.

Tuk had gone far to westward to live trap and bring in fresh breeder stock. This spring, he had a permit, under fur-farmer's license procured through Corporal Dan Martin, to trap the beaver extensively. Beaver pelts were at a new peak of price and Tuk, this morning, moved his trapping outfit up with a great hope.

Mallards and canvas-backs rose from every bend in the creek. Red-winged blackbirds and meadow larks warbled deliciously in every willow belt or meadow, and such sounds brought relief from his constant worry to Tuk. Shortly, the willows and poplars would burst their swollen buds and the swamp tamaracs would take on a new cloak of delicate green sheen which would blend beautifully with the deeper almost blue-green of the spruces.

Suddenly, at a flat near the first beaver dam, Tuk halted. He had glimpsed the large imprint of wolflike tracks.

"Olak!" he clipped.

The White Phantom was not above hunting here at the beaver zone on occasion. But shortly Tuk realized that these tracks were the tracks of the stranger's dogs. And then a low exclamation escaped Tuk as here and

there he picked up the imprint of man tracks.

His heart pounded fiercely as he fetched up at the first of the beaver lodges. He swore bitterly as he discovered that the zone had been trapped out.

There was no need in going farther afield in his investigation. Hundreds of dollars worth of pelts were lost to him, and although there was an unwritten law governing the rights of trappers and breeders, a sense of practised moral recognition of another's claims, Tuk knew that he could not legally prosecute this man creature who had taken the beavers.

Tuk looked about and could see that not for days, had Ahmisk, the beaver chieftain, and his kindred cut a single stick of fresh poplar. That was a sure sign that the beaver colonists had been exterminated.

"Ayaie!" Tuk groaned.

He fingered the trigger guard of his Winchester as his narrowed eyes squeezed out hot fire of resentment and hatred. But he realized that he could do nothing toward the recovery of the pelts, lest he bring about danger to himself and his kinfolk.

Sadly, slowly, he moved back to his cabin, where he was met by Netan, her questioning eyes telling him that she suspected some misfortune.

"What, Tuk?" she asked softly.

Tuk shrugged.

"*Mucha Satan,*" he breathed.

Netan slowly closed her eyes and nodded her understanding. . . .

CAT-footing through the brakes, Tuk and Tan were always scouting the movements of the little man and his companion. Suddenly Tuk halted. Twilight was settling on the pulsing early summer wilderness zone. Tuk caught at Tan's arm.

"Listen, brave one," he breathed. "There is trouble at the lair of the white one. Come. We go!"

Tuk tested wind and veered off right in a wide circle to come in on Olak's lair sector from the east. As he and Tan neared the spot they heard the mad snarls of dog creatures in fighting action.

They increased their pace. There were seven dogs in the team Pete had mushed in. If they were all loose, ayaie! With Sanyek in no condition to fight, Olak, the White Phantom would stand no chance against such odds. Tuk was determined to open fire on the dog creatures and chance the resultant action which Pete might take.

Now Tuk led into a wild fruit thicket from which he and Tan had often watched the White Phantom and his mate at play with their younglings of former seasons. Now the zone was electrified by a mad cacophony of hideous snarls, deafening and awe-inspiring.

Tuk parted the choke-cherry bushes. His brows jerked up for Sa, the son of Olak, flanked the great White Phantom in terrible battle action. Near-by, in spite of her condition, Sanyek feinted and struck, feinted and struck at another big malamute.

One of the dog team members lay groveling in the grass and rubble not far off in an endeavor to get clear away. Tuk swallowed hard as he glimpsed the horrible throat wounds of this wounded one. The dog's right ear hung by a thin strip of skin only, and blood poured freely from a terrible throat wound.

Suddenly the wilderness was blasted by the explosion of two rifle shots. Dogs and wolves separated. For a split second Sanyek hung as if frozen by indecision when Olak and Sa bounded to cover.

Another shot boomed. Sanyek buckled at the right foreleg. She recovered, whirled and went limping to cover.

A terrible light flamed from Tuk Cramer's eyes. Tan watched the older man carefully as Tuk shook with emotion while the lumbering Pete came in from the west.

"Have a care, Tuk," Tan whispered. "If you kill him, you will hang. Not even Caporal Martin could save you. Tuk!"

Tuk shook himself as if hurling off a mad desire. Together they watched the big man approach his groveling dog. They saw the musher run a hand up through his hair, under his fur cap, then he pointed his rifle muzzle at the dog's head and pulled. One shot killed the creaure outright. The other three dogs, badly wounded, had scattered, and were streaking for their home camp.

Now the man creature was within fifty feet of the watching Tan and Tuk. All at once, his roving glance settled on the mouth of Sanyek's lair. He started eagerly forward, a soft chuckle escaping him.

"So!" he exclaimed. "This is how I get revenge. I come back with a shovel and dig the little ones out, to batter their brains against a rock."

He broke off, chuckling thickly, almost

insanely, and in the fruit thicket young Tan quivered with an uncontrollable surge of fear.

The big musher swung and moved on to westward. Occasionally he looked back over his shoulder and shook his rifle in the direction of the lair.

Not for some time did Tan or Tuk move. At last Tan turned to his brother-in-law.

"What now, Tuk?" he asked. "The whelps —they will all be killed. They—"

Tan was cut off when Tuk clutched his arm tightly. Tuk was nodding off right where, to Tan's amazement, crept Olak, trailed by his great son, Sa.

For a long moment the White Phantom stood as if frozen, as he sniffed sharply for sign of danger. Then slowly he pushed his great body down through the lair entrance, to be followed by Sa.

"Ayale!" Tuk Cramer's fingers dug deeper through the buckskin of Tan's sleeve as now the great white wolf leader emerged from an emergency exit bearing a squirming whelpling in his jaws. Following came Sa, a bigger dog whelp in his mouth.

A strang chuckle escaped Tuk Cramer.

"You see, Tan," he exclaimed excitedly. "They shift the little ones to a new place, a safer place. Ayah! The Pete man will have much work before he find them again."

Tan shared Tuk's elation to the extent of a soft smile of agreement, but he was thinking more of the wounded mother, Sanyek.

HEAVY of heart, he turned and together they moved back to their home area, where Tuk gave Netan the story. It was a story of the greatness of Olak, the White Phantom, and his kind—a tale of sagacity not always accounted for nor understood by man.

But Netan seemed not too impressed by Tuk's narrative. She was thinking of the future. The beaver were gone, the dog creatures had started to plunder the domain of Olak. Ayah!

Netan's chest heaved sharply in undulated movement that clearly registered her sense of misgiving. She turned away to prepare supper. The happiness she had experienced at the coming of her young son, whom she and Tuk had named for Corporal Dan Martin, of the Mounted, had been marred by the arrival of these man creatures and their killer dogs. . . .

In the night, above the other multitudinous sounds of wild life—the eerie, bansheelike wail of Moakwa, the loon, the gabble of water fowl, the *croo-hrooing* of owls all rearing their young, there came the long dismal wails of Olak, the White Phantom.

Tuk Cramer snapped his head up from a cat nap. The young folk and Netan were long since asleep. When the white one called again, Tuk's mouth firmed. He knew those cries, could identify each one for its meaning. Tuk Cramer knew that Olak was troubled. . . .

Sanyek, Olak's mate, lay panting in the warm sunlight near her new lair zone. She was scarcely able to nurse her vigorous younglings. Her tongue lolled, and from time to time Olak came creeping in to flop down beside her and flick her hot muzzle with his tongue.

He brought soft, succulent snow-shoe rabbits to her, but she had no desire for food. More than once of late he had gently punched her to her feet, forcing her to flank him as he moved to a near-by slough, where Sanyek could drink and lave her shoulder wound.

This morning, Olak brought her a freshly killed young cock partridge, but even this failed to excite any desire in Sanyek. Olak pushed the still warm bird against her muzzle, then he ripped it open with his strong fangs and at last, for the first time in days, Sanyek raised her lolling head and touched the hot entrails with her tongue. Slowly Sanyek nibbled at the fresh food.

Olak made strange, small whimpering sounds. He whirled and darted to the den from which he soon emerged, pushing whelpling ahead of him. In turn he brought the young up to nurse.

Shortly she raised her head and finished the remains of the partridge, licking her chops. Within an hour, she crept to the den cave, where she gathered her well-fed young to her and settled back to sleep.

Tuk Cramer watched Sanyek almost daily. Her recovery brought to him a great sense of relief, for in Tuk's superstition-filled mind, Olak and his kindred were associated with the good spirits.

The summer moved on with the swift vigor of rapid development for flora and fauna. The season was punctuated by sharp electrical storms which struck terror to the hearts of wild creatures and human creatures alike, through the brevity of the storms brought swift atonement in blazing sunlight

or soft, creamy moonlight which, in the steamy aftermath of the storms, fired the hearts of all living creatures to a new hope and new desire.

The young of Olak and Sanyek developed into deepchested, handsome young swaggerlings and their mother, although white-scarred for life, progressed steadily.

Tuk Cramer and Tan watched the wild ones closely. Perhaps Tuk gave too much of his time and concern to Olak and his kindred. He might better have been more closely watching the north canyon, where he had uncovered and later covered a good strike of gold. His samples had been assayed more than a year before and the report was good. But as he had no immediate use for gold, he had sealed in his drift tunnel in the gulch bank, content to live the life he loved—a life of hunting and of trapping, the curing of deer and moose hides, and the jerking of venison.

Up at the canyon where only recently a scientist had explored for uranium-bearing ore, the little man, this self-named Professor Appleby, chuckled excitedly as he washed out a pan of gravel and clay. He was watched by Pete Manjelle, who did the bulk of the heavy digging. At last the little man by the use of mercury, had separated a handsome showing of pay dirt.

"What did I tell you, Pete?" the little man asked. "Pay dirt! There is nothing to beat it even up at Yellowknife. You see it? We shall work fast and if that half-breed Cramer and his jackal brother-in-law become too snoopy, we shall have to find some means of disposing of them. You have your beavers. You still have the boy's foxes to trap. Shortly, with the first snows, we'll be in position to sneak out, with a good take all round."

PETE MANJELLE ground his jaws on a quid of eating tobacco. A strange new light gleamed in his beady eyes.

"Shore, shore enough, professor," he growled. "Yuh was right all the time. We'll make a killin' and get away—and we ain't done nobody no harm. Cramer had no rights to the beavers, actual. He has not staked claims here. Mebbe that fox trappin' at the compounds, when it happens, will be stealin', but—" Pete broke off, chuckling thickly.

"It's quite a joke, about this gold working, Professor," he went on then. "More'n once I've picked up Cramer's tracks around where he had his own tunnel driftin' in. It was a good idea of yores to tunnel in from the other side of the bank. . . ."

The smaller man half-turned, his mouth twisting in an enigmatic grimace that was disturbing to Pete Manjelle.

"You are quite right, my friend," he said. "We must be prepared to move out swiftly when the time comes. Otherwise, it might not be too healthy. The taking of those foxes will have to be your problem—a pretty touchy problem, too, for you will have to snatch them quickly, pelt them almost instantly, and be ready to mush out, with what dogs we have left, as quickly as possible."

Pete Manjelle essayed no reply. Covertly he watched his companion, an engineer who, because of a greed which warped his brain, had been chased out of the Yellowknife fields. The little man was little only in physique. He had the cunning of a cross fox vixen and a brain warped enough to kill if necessary—to kill with that snub-nosed automatic snugged always in its shoulder holster which he wore sleeping or awake.

But Manjelle was not too disturbed for the moment. He was biding his time. The little man was an experienced prospector and would separate the gold, much gold, from the dross.

When a dry twig cracked sharply near-by, Pete spun with nervous reaction. But he failed to see the young Indian stripling, Tan, backing silently into the high bush cranberry thicket.

Tan's heart beat madly as he swore inwardly at having broken that dry windfall.

With his own eyes Tan had seen the plundering of Tuk's gold gulch. Fearfully he made his way back to the home area. He realized that if he gave Tuk this news, Tuk could no longer hold himself in restraint.

Tan had picked up only scraps of the men's conversation and was not aware of Manjelle's plot to rob the fox compounds, later.

At the cabin, Tan took Lal to one side. To her he poured out his story.

"But, ayaie! I can not tell Tuk, Lal," the youth exclaimed. "Twice now I have laid the hand on his arm when his finger had already curled around the trigger. It is bad. I go back to the canyon some more to watch. Perhaps I find where the little man stores his gold pokes. I shall take them while he sleeps."

Tears trickled down Lal's lovely face. She

patted Tan's cheek gently.

"Do what you think best, Tan dear," she said softly. "But, have a care. Those men are dangerous."

Tan pursued his lone searching and watching. But he found no trace of the separated gold dust and nuggets.

Autumn waned with its multi-tinted beauty and at last the first whistling snows whirled down on the hinterland range of the White Phantom with a fury seldom experienced before by Tuk Cramer and his kinfolk.

When the first clear weather came, Tan moved off with a string of traps. He took only a light lunch. Tuk intended hunting in the area to the south of the home area. They needed some fresh meat. He had cautioned Tan to make an early return.

But at dusk, when Tuk returned, successful from the hunt, he was amazed to find that Tan was not yet back. Tuk was weary. A young buck which at last he had killed, had given him a long chase.

Slowly he ate a supper of thick venison steaks, dreading to hear Netan start a conversation. He knew how concerned she was over Tan's absence.

"I shall go as soon as my legs are rested, lovely one," Tuk said, yawning. "By then, the moon will be up. I shall sleep only an hour or so, then go. Ayaie! What you said was right—we shall have to move from this grim valley, on to the Outside, for the evil spirits have surely come to this range of the White Phantom. I . . . Netan, what was that?"

NETAN laid a hand on Tuk's shoulder. "I heard nothing, brave one," she breathed softly. "Rest now—sleep. I shall call you when the moon is high."

Tuk closed his eyes, and when her child was put to sleep Netan, too, lay wearily on her bunk to rest.

The first sub-zero snap often lays a heavy hand upon the eyelids of human beings in the wilds. Often at the commencement of winter, the rarified air enforces a drugged sleep, a sound sleep. Tonight its effects were felt by Netan and Lal who, too, succumbed.

It was the sudden snort of a horse that brought Netan flying from her bunk. She shook Tuk sharply as she quivered in every limb.

Tuk was quickly awake and Netan quickly told him what she had heard.

"Sacré nom d'un chien!" he gasped. "A dream has weakened you, lovely one. Horses, here on the range of the White Phantom?"

Tuk spun at a sound on the shack door. He jerked himself to his feet and reached for his rifle. Slowly he moved to the door which he opened. A man form was standing at the stoop, a man whose face startled Tuk Cramer. It was the face of the picture likeness Tan had shown Tuk. Beyond this man stood another, a well-built, parka-clad man form who held two pack ponies.

"I am Professor Appleby," the tall man at the stoop intoned, smiling. "You are Mr. Cramer, are you not?"

"Oui, m'sieu. Come in. *Nom d' Dieu!* But you are the real Professaire Apple-by, *oui?"*

The stranger stepped into the lamplight, bowing to Netan.

"You know," he said. "Then it was correct—that Sargant and the man Pete Manjelle mushed on here with my outfit, Mr. Cramer? We did not think they would have the nerve. There is an alarm out for them, to all Mounted Policeposts in the territories."

"But yes, *msieu,* and I . . . What was that?"

Tuk moved swiftly past the professor. A sharp bark of alarm had come from the fox compounds.

Before Tuk could reach the pens he heard the wild screech of sled runners. Quickly he examined the compounds in the moonlight. There were man tracks visible—and blood on the snow.

Tuk quickly made a thorough search. Two, perhaps three of the older dog foxes had been taken, but the vixens and young stock had not been harmed. This was bad enough, but Tuk realized how much worse it could have been had it not been for the timely arrival of Appleby and his companion.

Now Tuk thought of Tan. "T-a-n!" he gasped. *"Mon Dieu!* I come, brave one."

He hurried back to the cabin, where Appleby introduced his companion as Frank Mason, ex-constable of the Mounted. Quickly, as Mason took the ponies to a rear shed and blanketed them, having released their loads, Appleby told Tuk all he knew in connection with the pilfering of his outfit by the man he called Sargant.

"I was ill, very ill with influenza, Cramer," the scientist explained. "Sargant, a fugitive from the Yellowknife mining country, bought over Pete Manjelle, my dog driver. Together

they stole my outfit and—well, you know the rest. Mason and I will come with you. Your wife was telling me of the absence of the young man, Tan. Mason will know how to handle those crooks. He will get them out to the Law. But come now. Your young brother-in-law might be in grave danger. He . . . Great heavens! That fearful cry!"

"O-o-ou-u-u-u-u-u-u—"

Again the fierce battle cry of Olak sounded and then another higher-pitched wail. Tuk Cramer started.

"It is the White Phantom, *m'sieu,* and Sa, he's son. The pack is down Ayaie! They weel be meeting the dog team of the Pete man. Come—quickly!"

Mason joined them and, led by Tuk, they moved on toward the northwest.

The snarls of the attacked dogs was terrific. Olak, Sa, Sanyek and their kindred had come in close to the habitat of the stranger man creatures to make their vengeance attack.

Pete Manjelle had left his team unguarded only for a brief period while he called at the cabin to get the man called Sargant.

Tuk Cramer halted his party in a small snow-covered swale where in the cover of willow scrub, they watched the fangs of the White Phantom and his followers gleam fiercely in attack. The wolf pack almost tore their enemies from their harness.

SUDDENLY the squat cabin's door opened. Pete Manjelle came out roaring, shooting. Cramer gasped as he saw a young wolf struck by a bullet in full leap, and crash dead on the snow.

Tuk stole around the cabin, to fetch in at Manjelle's back.

"Stop *mucha Satan!*" Tuk clipped.

The Winchester seemed to freeze in Manjelle's grip. Then suddenly, at a warning call from Mason, Tuk leaped to one side.

Sargant was emerging from the cabin. His hand had flashed to his shoulder holster and, as Tuk leaped, the snubby automatic exploded. But Sargant dropped the weapon with a howl of pain as a well-timed shot from Mason sent a bullet through his right forearm. Appleby himself now covered Manjelle.

Badly wounded, yelping dogs, free of their harness, came groveling to the cabin.

"Okay now, Cramer," Mason boomed. "Take a look inside. See if the young boy Tan is there. He better had be, Sargant, Manjelle, or—"

Sargant was clutching his badly bleeding arm as Tuk thrust him to one side and entered the cabin.

"Tuk!"

Tuk Cramer gasped, quaking with happiness at the sound of his name. Tan was alive. Tuk darted to the corner where the youth, who had been clubbed by Manjelle, lay bound.

"Ayaie, Tuk," Tan breathed. "When I heard the white one and Sa in battle, I had a thought that you might come. I had the feeling that the good spirits had returned."

Tuk cut Tan free and helped him to his feet. Tan steadied himself, leaning against Tuk, then slowly he held himself up in his own power. Youth was serving him well.

"How, Tan?" Tuk asked softly.

"The head aches, but the heart is strong and has a happiness," Tan replied. "Did—did the big one kill off all my foxes, as he said he would?"

"No, brave one. But three—the older dogs which you intended, two of them at least, to pelt. The vixens and the young are all well."

With Tuk's help Tan moved out of doors where he was introduced to Appleby and Mason. It was Appleby himself who bound up Sargant's arm, splinting it with spruce bark.

"You're going along to the Outside, Sargant," the big scientist boomed. "I'll be along later to press charges against you—as if there weren't enough charges against you already. You remember the Yellowknife episode, of course?"

Sargant whined. Now Mason secured the two crooks and headed them toward the southeast. "Okay—mush!" he ordered.

Tuk and Tan led off, but suddenly they halted. Tuk smiled as he laid a hand gently on Tan's arm.

Out of the sharp night there came the long victory wail of Olak, the White Phantom.

"O-o-ou-u-u-u-u-u-u-u—"

Tuk shuddered.

"All is well, Tan," he said quaveringly. "Death has stalked away from the grim valley once more. And now—" Tuk broke off with a light chuckle. "I have much gold mined for me and my beavers are all pelted. Ayaie! Out of the work of the evil ones has come much good, yes?"

Tan smiled and nodded and as the grim Valley of Forgotten Men again echoed and reechoed the wild calls of Olak, and the party moved swiftly on to the cabins at the springs.

SPOOKS IS GOOFY HUMANS

By JOE AUSTELL SMALL

A booger's no laughing matter at all when Frank Simpson builds it himself—and then it ups and bites him hard!

THE trouble with "Sump" Doolin is he's too scared of spooks. Me and "Prank" Simpson ain't exactly boogerish about them, but at the same time we don't aim to unduly associate with the critters if we can help it.

I've never seen a cowpoke that don't believe way back in his unspeaking mind in some form of spook, ghost, or spirit.

There's just too many unnatural things happen on the lonesome ranges at night. Howsomever, it's not manly in a waddy to go around jumping at every crack of a stick and shying from every shadow in the moonlight.

That's the fever Sump's got, though. And looks like the poor blamed fool can't help it. He's just natural spook shy.

Being like that makes it mighty hard on Sump living around a gent like "Prank" Simpson.

Pullin' a good one on somebody is Prank's excuse for living. Blamed feller is too often about it, though. He can't just pull a good one and let the situation lay as she is for a few days. Prank's good for some sort of devilment once every twenty-four hours for every day in the year.

He ought to be slowed down a little, Prank ought. He needs a backfire or two to make him cautious. So it pleases us punchers of the Mighty Little Ranch a heap when things bust loose the way they do over on the Frio.

Sump and Prank and me are camped out on the Skeleton Fork of the Little Frio, the time I'm talking about.

We're chousing out strays from the brush and branding yearlings overlooked by the regular roundup. We've been there since morning.

Prank stays as quiet and innocent-looking as a fat kitten. We enjoy being away from headquarters a right smart. Away over here in this lonely corner of the ranch we can do might-nigh anything we want to. Like quitting early and catfishing.

I'm squatted down before the campfire frying fat catfish steaks when Prank comes in with an armload of wood.

Sump is hunkered down over his saddle, trying to splice a stirrup band in place, and he's having trouble making things gee-haw. He don't pay no attention to nobody.

Prank glances at him, looks at me, and then brings out a little rattler he's killed while robbing a brush pile for wood. Prank places the snake beside a blackjack snag and covers it over with leaves. He smiles devilish at me.

SUMP DOOLIN is running-scared of a rattlesnake. They come second in his line of boogers. Fact is, sometimes I think it's a draw between a ghost and a scaly-backed old rattler as to which can make Sump get higher behind.

Sometimes I feel right sorry for that man. It's a downright shame for a fellow to be so scared over natural things like rattlesnakes and ghosts.

We eat supper, smoke awhile and listen to the curlews cry over the black river bottoms. We go to sleep then, with sounds of running water and moaning willows to drowse us off. I like to sleep out in the wilds that way.

When Prank wakes me up an hour later, he's smiling like a jackass eating briars.

"Be quiet and just look," Prank advises.

I sit there, wiping the sleep out of my eyes. I don't say nothing. I figure Prank is old enough to bug his own beard.

The waddy's movements are swift and deft. He brings the little ground rattler out of hiding and wedges its mouth open with a short stick. He coils the snake up then and places it in bed with Sump.

Now Prank must have been planning this joke a good while because he has all the makings. He pulls out a long, greenish-black twine string and a safety pin.

Being careful not to wake Sump, the 'poke fastens his pin to the sag in the seat of Sump's long-handled drawers. Then he ties one end of the twine around the snake's head and the other end to that pin in Sump's long-handles. About six feet of line now separates Sump from the rattler.

When everything's ready, Sump takes a pair of snake-rattlers from his pocket and gives the things a trial shake about four inches from Sump's right ear.

That first buzz causes Sump to quit snoring. The second time he stirs uneasily and rolls over half on the snake. The third round of buzzing brings Sump's eyes open with a flutter.

This is when things begin to pick up.

Sump comes up shaking the sleep out of his eyes. The long, tall puncher's head is as innocent of hair as a Texas onion, and it shines in the moonlight like a silver dollar on a black rug.

Sump don't hesitate long. There's a strong suspicion in his mind that he's heard a rattler. That bump he's leaning against don't feel altogether natural.

Sump shuffles to the side quickly. There it is, a rattler coiled up in all its ferocious glory, mouth open and ready to strike.

Sump stares at the snake for a split second in terror-stricken fascination.

The cowpoke don't know that the cause of that snake's mouth-open eagerness to eat him blood-raw is just a harmless little old stick. Sump's not looking for small details like sticks which are used to prop open snakes' mouths at a time like that.

Besides, you can't see the stick very well in the dim light. One thought only is on Sump Doolin's mind—He's been lying there half on a rattlesnake!

It's only natural under such conditions that Sump springs from his roll like a high-lifed cat. The move takes up that slack in

the twine, of course, and causes the rattler to jump madlike at Sump.

Even a man not unduly scared of snakes can see that Sump's had enough encouragement from this unfriendly movement on the rattler's part to bring on a little extra motion.

"Gosh-a-mighty, boys—look out! Whole camp's full o' big rattlers!" Sump says it excited-like. "Get out, quick!"

Sump Doolin don't linger to see whether we mind him or not. As the puncher leaves his roll, the snake follows, drug along by that six-foot length of twine.

Sump tries to dodge. He sashays around in the moonlight like an Indian buck with a bee on his hip, but it don't do any good. The snake being tied to Sump's drawers, it follers the waddy to the smallest movement.

It discourages Sump Doolin a right smart. When a man can't dodge out of danger at a time like that, the best thing he can do is put distance between him and his trouble, and that's what Sump does about it now.

He does it fast and noisy, too. The cowpoke is mortally scaring up the ground by the time he hits that first cut-bank draw.

I ask Prank if he don't reckon Sump will hurt his fool self, but Prank is in no condition to answer right now. I never saw a human get as much jolt out of a joke as Prank Simpson. He's sitting there on a log, long drawers shining in the moonlight, rocking back and forth and slapping his thighs in wild glee.

ALL of a sudden Prank hushes, stands up and holds his good ear to the wind. The sounds that drift back to us on that soft night breeze make me think of a wild bull stampede in the dry brush.

Sump's running blind through the woods, and he's taking a hole with him wherever he goes.

I don't know how far Sump runs before he figures the pull on his drawers ain't natural. He drags into camp an hour later, looking like low man in a wildcat fight. There's a look on the puncher's face like a skeleton just thumped the lobe of his left ear with a bony finger.

Sump don't say a word. He just piles into his roll and pretty soon is snoozing again.

Sump Doolin still don't say nothing next morning when he prizes open his heavy lids and wiggles his nose at the smell of coffee. He gets up, drowsylike, stretches and asks if the grub is ready. Prank says it is just about, and Sumps starts to dress.

Looks like, though, when Sump finds that pin in the seat of his drawers, that Prank will bust out all over again. But he don't, and I don't, and Sump he still don't say anything.

All that day Sump looks like he's studying. One time he speaks to me.

"I'm gonna study up somethin' that will break Prank from that infernal jokin' once and for all," he says.

About an hour later Prank wrinkles his forehead, bunches his eyebrows and looks dreary about the cheeks.

"Got the stomach gallops again, boys," he says.

"Better ride on into camp and lay down awhile," I advise. "Me and Sump can wind up this piddlin' work for the evenin'."

Prank takes my advice and rides.

Me and Sump finish up about sundown, crawl our nags, and ride in to camp.

Prank looks worse even from a distance. He's lying there on his roll groaning and looking sick out of his eyes. The waddy's face is white, and there's a plumb hot feel to his forehead.

"We better get you to a doctor," I say, concerned-like.

"Oh, no, no!" Prank assures us. "I'll be all right in the mornin'. I've had these spells before. A good meal and a night's sleep always brings me round. I'll be all right in the mornin'."

So we cook Prank a hot supper. Even if Sump is a little riled over that joke, he forgets at a time like this. He takes Prank's grub to him. The 'poke props hisself up and eats from his roll.

He calls for more grub and coffee, saying it's already making his stomach feel better, and Sump takes it to him. Prank smokes a quirly, lays back and is snoring in half an hour.

Me and Sump roll a couple, talk about gill-fishing that old forty-pound cat out of the Redbank Hole upriver four-five years ago. Then we turn in.

I lie there awhile, listening to a way-off owl hoot. A dog's bark bounces back from the river banks a good ways upstream. I drop off myself before I aim to.

I've no more than had time to reach the cross-cut saw stage in my snoring when a hand shakes my shoulder. I stir to find Prank's face sitting there on his shoulders in the gloom, all lit up like a kid's eyes at

Christmastime.

"I got a good one ready for Sump!" he enlightens.

"Aw, Prank," I say, and I remember sudden. "Why, yuh're sick, dang it! Go back to bed!"

"Just playin' sick so I could ride in ahead of you all and work out my plan. Rubbed ashes on my face to make it look peaked and held my head close to the fire so it'd be hot when you boys rode in. This one will shore catch Sump off guard!"

"Now, dang it—" I protest, but Prank holds one finger across his lips for silence and grabs me by the arm.

He leads me out in the bushes. I jump back with a young holler when I see that ghost standing there.

"It's not real!" Prank says. "I'd have pulled it on both of yuh, but yuh're not as scared of ghosts as Sump. You might have caught on and spoiled it. Lemme show yuh how it works."

THE thing's a chore of mad genius, if I ever saw one. It's the blastedest ghost outfit I ever seen. Prank has found the leg bones of an old cow skeleton. He's wrapped a sheet around the main brush-stuffed body of the ghost and has let the leg bones hang out places where legs and arms ought to be.

The prank-maniac has taken an old flat hipbone and drawed eyes, nose and mouth on it with a piece of charcoal. It's the dadburndest real-lookingest ghost I ever got wrinkles in my voice over.

I'm glad now that Prank has woke me up. I can't keep from falling in with the whole idea myself.

I have to laugh a little already at the thoughts that a spook-boogerish gent like Sump will cook up in his mind when that thing starts floating toward him through the pale moonlight.

And it will float all right. Prank has stretched a tight bailing wire from the brush to a sapling by our bedrolls. He done this before waking me, I reckon. He's hooked the

[*Turn page*]

Entertaining Puzzles on Every Page of

Popular Crossword Puzzles

NOW ON SALE—15c AT ALL STANDS!

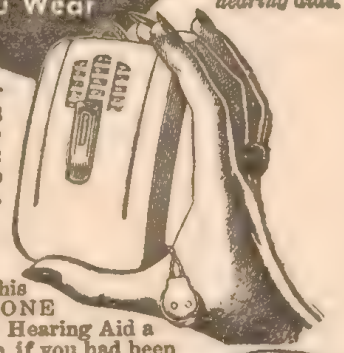
FIND OUT WHY THE

DEAF

CALL IT A MIRACLE

This ONE Tiny Unit is ALL You Wear

About ⅓ size and weight of old-style hearing aids.



More people wear BELTONES *than all other one-unit hearing aids combined.*

You'd call this new BELTONE Mono-Pac Hearing Aid a miracle, too, if you had been wearing a separate battery pack strapped to your body, with entangling wires, and then suddenly found the new

Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

Beltone

ONE-UNIT HEARING AID

ACCEPTED COUNCIL ON PHYSICAL MEDICINE

BELTONE HEARING AID CO.
1450 W. 19th St., Dept. TG-75, Chicago 6

FREE BOOKLET—MAIL COUPON

Beltone Hearing Aid Co., Dept. TG-75
1450 W. 19th St., Chicago 6, Ill.

Please send me, without obligation, FREE Booklet about Hearing Problems.

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

*Town*_____ *Zone*___ *State*_____

PICTURE RING $1.

Exquisite Picture Ring—made from any photo. SEND NO MONEY! Mail photo with paper strip for ring size. Pay postman only $1 plus postage. Hand tinted 25c extra. Photo returned with ring. Money back guarantee.

Made from Any Photo or Picture! SEND NO MONEY!

SEND PHOTO AND RING SIZE NOW!

PICTURE RING CO. Dept. K-26, CINCINNATI 2, Ohio

THE MYSTERIOUS WORLD WITHIN YOU

Those strange feelings of intuition and premonition are the urges of your inner self. Within you there is a world of unlimited power. Learn to use it and you can do the right thing at the right time and realize a life of happiness and abundance. Send for new, FREE, SEALED BOOK that tells how you may receive these teachings. Address: Scribe L.Z.B.

THE ROSICRUCIANS
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

ghost onto this wire so that it will slip along toward camp as he pulls a twine string tied to it and ending up in his hand in camp.

Prank pulls the string a little to show me how it works. The ghost slides along like a sure-nuff booger floating through the air. It makes cold chills run up my backbone even with me knowing what it is.

We go lay back down, and Prank starts throwing chunks of wood out into the brush. It rattles and pops the dry twigs and leaves like something alive.

Sump stirs restless like. He talks a little in his sleep.

Prank throws another chunk. It hits some loose rock and rattles like a couple of skeletons dancing on a tin roof. It brings Sump up.

"What th'—" Sump starts in.

He looks all around. He looks at Prank and me. Then he shakes my shoulder. I pretend like I'm too sleepy to wake up. I just roll over and groan.

Sump turns to look at the dark again. I feel the puncher jerk as his eyes hit home base. "Lawks!" he whispers, excited. "Wake up. There's the dangest thing comin' out of that brush yonder I ever saw!"

I stir and sit up, wiping my eyes like I'm still might-nigh asleep. Then I look where Sump's pointing. Prank's already sitting up looking too.

When I see Sump's booger, things get all mixed up in my mind.

It's not white no more at all. The ghost is bareheaded. Long white hair hangs down in the critter's face. It's stringy, and it rustles in the puff of breeze that shivers the cottonwood leaves about now.

The thing has a dirty gray beard and buck teeth that rattle when the ghost walks. A long black coat and white britches hang loose from a bony frame. The ghost's boots are night-black.

With the white britches hooked over the boot tops and hanging down on the outer sides, it looks like that ghost's legs are sawed off and that he's walking on pure air. Then, what with the black coat and that slouchy white hat, it's the plague-gondest thing I ever popped an eyeball at.

But it's the creature's eyes that've got me bothered. They're wild and staring. They look red in the moonlight to me. With the white hat on top of them and the dirty beard and coat underneath, they look like burning holes in the night.

I break off my shock long enough to look at Prank. He's sitting bolt upright, under jaw drooped, and there's a look on the man's face like he's just seen a fly spit in a spider's eye.

Prank looks at me.

"See," he says, and Prank's voice sounds hollow and wavy. "I ain't pullin' the string, but the thing keeps walkin' toward us."

Prank looks like he's having a right smart time figuring the deal out.

Sump comes to life first. He leans over and grabs his belt and holster. He pulls out his gun.

"If yuh've got life in yuh," Sump yells, "yuh better stop! I'm fixin' to shoot!"

But the ghost comes on. Blamed critter is smiling queer now. It shows up his buck teeth better. He's walking toward us slow, like he's trying to make up his mind on which neck of ours he's gonna sink them buck teeth first.

I JUMP a couple of feet without thinking. Sump's old .44 belches flame into the night. We can see the finger of fire going straight to the walking ghost, but it don't faze him.

Sump hesitates a minute, and then he shoots five times as fast as he can work his gun. Sump's a dead shot. We see all five flashes head directly for the ghost's heart.

The thing stops sudden. It laughs then. That gurgle sounds to me like the insane cackle of a buried-alive maniac in a hollow tomb.

Scare prickles bump up my skin like a shriveled lemon, and my toenails curl backwards in my sock feet. I shiver sudden, like a cold blast has hit me direct from the North Pole. Then I feel that weakness inside my stomach.

The laugh is what does it. Prank has been sitting there looking like a man watching his own skeleton dance in the moonlight. He's been stock-still till now. But when that cackle drifts to us on the soft breeze, Prank gets high behind.

The puncher don't bother about putting on his pants or boots. He don't even grab at his hat. Prank just sort of rises straight up, and he's got a good running start before his feet ever hit the ground.

Prank busts a hole in the brush you could drive a yoke of oxen through, and I'm hollering out his tracks before they're made good.

Me and Prank find the going hard that night. We hit everything within a strip

thirty-yards wide of where we pass.

By the time we've run a mile, I'm feeling pretty fagged. We don't quit for our mind's sake. We stop when I follow Prank over an old log and plow out a furrow through the rocky ground with my nose as an opening wedge. We are too weak to get up, and that is the reason Prank and me stop running.

We lay there and blow awhile.

"Howlin' buzzards!" Prank says, "I never believed a whole lot in spooks till now. Thought that one had us shore." He raises up to a sitting position. "I'm whupped. I couldn't move a muscle if my life depended on it."

"Me, neither," I say, tired-like.

But a man never knows what he can do at trying times until the moment arises. We hear a stirring of the brush behind us and another crazy cackle.

All of a sudden new strength wells up inside me, and I feel a good deal more revived than I had up till now. I guess Prank rested a heap in that short time, too, because he's up and running before I can lift my hunkus from the hard ground. I follow his noise for a good half mile.

It is the bamboo briars that stop us. The saying goes that even a tough-hided old bull can't bust through a thick growth of wicked bamboo thorns. A man is not supposed to be able to get past the first vine. But Prank is halfway through the entire thicket before his momentum dies. I bulge the hole on a little further before my bruised body comes to rest on the briary ground ahead of him.

We lay there breathing hard and listening for ghosts on our back trail.

But the noise we hear next ain't no ghost.

It's Sump, and he's laughing.

We hear another voice laughing, too, and

[*Turn page*]

Now for EVERY WORK SHOP!

NEW Invention Electroplates by BRUSH

Easy to Plate CHROMIUM GOLD, SILVER, NICKEL, COPPER

. . . For Pleasure and Profit!

If you have a workshop—at home or in business—you need this new Warner Electroplater. At the stroke of an electrified brush, you can electroplate models and projects—you can replate worn articles, faucets, tools, fixtures, silverware, etc. with a durable, sparkling coat of metal . . . Gold, Silver, Chromium, Nickel, Copper or Cadmium. Method is easy, simple, quick. Everything furnished—equipment complete, ready for use. *By doing a bit of work for others, your machine can pay for itself within a week.* So make your shop complete by getting a Warner Electroplater right away. Send today for FREE SAMPLE and illustrated literature. ACT AT ONCE! *Mail Coupon.*

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., DEPT. M-33
1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Ill.

FREE Details & Sample!

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., 1512 Jarvis Avenue, Chicago 26, Dept. M-33
Gentlemen: Send Free Sample and Details to:
Name_____
Address_____
City State

RUPTURE!

An amazing Air-Cushion Invention allows body freedom at work or play. Light, neat, cool, sanitary. Durable, cheap. Day and night protection helps Nature support weakened muscles gently but surely. No risk. **Sent on Trial!** Write NOW for free Booklet and **Proof of Results.** All correspondence confidential.

Brooks Company, 382-H State St., Marshall, Mich.

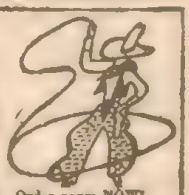
● MECHANICS • HOME STUDY

Step up your own skill with facts & figures of your trade. Audels Mechanics Guides contain Practical Inside Trade Information in handy form. Fully illustrated. Easy to Understand. Highly Endorsed. Check book you want for 7 days' Free Examination. Send no Money. Nothing to pay postman. ☐Carpentry $6 • ☐Auto $4 • ☐Oil Burners $1 ☐Sheet Metal $1 • ☐Welding $1 • ☐Refrigeration $4 ☐Plumbing $6 • ☐Masonry $6 • ☐Painting $2 • ☐Radio $4 ☐Electricity $4 • ☐Mathematics $2 • ☐Steam Engineers $4 ☐Machinist $4 • ☐Blueprint $2 • ☐Diesel $2 • ☐Drawing $2. If satisfied you pay only $1 a month until price is paid.

● AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23 St., New York 10, N. Y.

REAL WESTERN WALLET

Here's the rugged, genuine leather wallet, EL RANCHO, handsomely designed by a skilled craftsman of the west. Boots, saddles, lassoes, guns, brands, and sombreros are richly embossed on all sides of this two-tone brown wallet. Totes all around glide-easy zipper, 4 celluloid photo-card holders and snap shut change purse. Also has identification card window, memo space and roomy bill section. A treasured gift for the amazingly low price of $1.95. Order yours NOW! SEND NO MONEY. Wallet will be rushed to you immediately. Pay postman only $1.95 plus postage and 20% Fed. tax.



MAIL COUPON TODAY

RIO LEATHER PRODUCTS CO.
215 Court St., Newark 8, N. J.
Gentlemen:
Please send me ..... EL RANCHO wallets by return mail.
Name .....
Address .....
City ..... State .....

NEW MIDGET ELECTRIC ARC WELDER

RETAILS ONLY $3.95

FULLY GUARANTEED

Plugs Into Light Socket—AC or DC

It's new! It's handy! It's efficient! Use the Midget Electric Arc Welder for hundreds of light-metal jobs. Does comparable welding work with a 1/16 inch welding rod on thin metal as that of larger and higher priced welders. Operates on 15 ampere fuse, 110 volt 60 cycle A.C. or D.C. current, by use of our special standard-coated 1/16-inch welding rods. Generous supply of rods supplied with machine. Recommended for all light welding like automobile fenders, etc. Take the Midget Arc anywhere to the job. Sturdily built and fully guaranteed. Comes complete—ready to use. Nothing else to buy. No previous welding experience needed! Any one mechanically inclined can learn to weld with this machine. You'll find hundreds of money-saving, timesaving uses for the Midget Arc around your home, garage, or workshop. Also in garages, factories, repair shops, tin shops, mechanics, farmers, inventors, etc. Order a Midget Electric Arc Welder Now! SEND NO MONEY. We'll rush one to you, complete with rods and helmet (equipped with APPROVED welding glass). Pay postman only $3.95 plus postage charges. If not satisfied, return Midget Arc in 5 days for prompt and we'll refund your money immediately. RUSH YOUR ORDER NOW.

MIDGET ARC WELDER CO., Strader Ave., Dept. U-233, Cincinnati 26, Ohio

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 50—Many Swedish Massage graduates make $50, $75 or even more per week. Large full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE—Now! THE College of Swedish Massage, Dept. 763E, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11, Ill.

Fit-Rite makes False Teeth TIGHT

Makes loose dental plates fit snugly and comfortably. *LASTS for MONTHS!*

Simply squeeze on dental plate and put it in your mouth. Hardens and becomes part of plate. Money-back guarantee. FREE Generous package of Dental Plate Cleanser with each order. Send $1.00 or mailed parcel post collect.

Fit-Rite Co., 1573 Milwaukee Ave. Dept. 5-82, Chicago, Ill.

BE A DETECTIVE

WORK HOME or TRAVEL. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE. Write to GEO. R. H. WAGNER, 125 W. 86th St., N. Y.

LAW

STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 38 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for FREE BOOK.

AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 76-T, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men. Caution: Use only as directed.

FREE BOOK

30 Years in Business

THE NEWELL COMPANY
153 Clayton, Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

then Sump says somethin'.

"I guess they're plumb on over the rise by now," he says. "I don't reckon they'll be back before mornin'."

"Don't reckon they will," the other voice says.

"They'll never figure the deal out," Sump continues. "And I don't aim to tell them. They'll never figure out that I run clean over to yore house last night when Prank tied that rattlesr e to my drawers and planned this out with you. And me shootin' cartridges at yuh with the lead taken out ought to cinch the spook deal. They shore looked funny when yuh didn't fall after I shot, didn't they, Sam?"

"Shore did!" Sam Wilson, our neighboring rancher, admits.

We hear something pop like a man slapping his thigh, and then both Sam and Sump laugh right smart.

After they leave, Prank rolls over and says quietlike, "Well, I'll be doggoned!" That's all he says. Just, "Well, I'll be doggoned!"

"Me, too," I admit. "That was the goofiest lookin' human I ever saw not to be a spook. Reckon we ought to head back for camp?"

"Don't think we ought," Prank answered. "I'd ruther sleep here on the thorny ground."

"Me, too," I say and lay back against the sharp briars.

UNPREDICTABLE ARCHIE

(Concluded from page 90)

down into a steady, respectable married man. He always said no man's worth a hang till he's married. . . . Now that he believes in me—in us—don't you think we ought to keep him thinking he's right? Sweetheart, I love you so much! Marry me, won't you, darling?"

Her arms stole up around his neck.

"Yes," she whispered, and as she felt his lips meet hers she realized that this was the happiest and most thrilling moment she had ever known. For at last she was admitting her own deep love for unpredictable Archie!

Follow the exciting exploits of Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf Lawman, in every issue of

TEXAS RANGERS

Now on Sale—15c at All Stands!

THE CHUCK WAGON

(Continued from page 9)

ster trying to break into the sport could always find a champion in this fellow whose determination to learn overcame all obstacles!

The Flying Cowboy

While attending the rodeo or rather taking part in it at Boston last November, Pete Kerscher (sometimes called "Wild Horse" Pete from the fact that for years he made a business of gathering wild horses for rodeos) won an airplane on a national radio program.

The plane was turned over to Pete about two months later and he is using it to fly about the many pastures of the World's Championship Rodeo Corporation. Even before the war Pete, who is a pilot, used a plane in rounding up wild horses. The method was to fly over the range of the wild horses, scare them with the plane and cause them to run. This was repeated until the wild herd was almost exhausted and then the wranglers on horseback could come in and would have little difficulty in driving the herd into a corral.

Arena Notes

Latest reports are to the effect that the contestants who were injured in the long gruelling contests of the rodeo at Madison Square Garden last fall have about all recovered. These include Gerald Roberts, who suffered a broken leg; Howard Baker, who had his neck broken; Jimmy Schumacher, who had a broken leg, Jim Whiteman, who had a broken leg, and Jack Buschbaum, who suffered a fractured vertebra.

Harry Knight, cowboy who has for many years been well known at American rodeos, is originally from Canada. He is now running a night club at Chandler, Arizona. His mother started down from Canada to visit him in November. It was her first time in the United States, and her first trip in an airplane. She never reached Arizona, for the plane crashed near Burbank, California, and she was killed.

Business at the stock shows where they have rodeos in conjunction has been enormous in the past few years. Many of these shows have practically outgrown their quarters and are rebuilding or expanding their present facilities. Among these are the shows at Denver, Colorado, and Fort Worth and Houston, Texas.

The total prize list in the five major events of the Rodeo of the Southwestern Exposition

[*Turn page*]

GET INTO **RADIO** TELEVISION ELECTRONICS NOW!

INTERESTING JOBS -- GOOD PAY -- EARN WHILE YOU LEARN -- A BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN, are just a few of the opportunities awaiting you as a Trained National Radio, Television and Electronic Expert. Broadcasting, Radio Service, and other specialized phases are constantly demanding more and more trained men. Get all the facts about this GREAT FIELD. ACT AT ONCE!

SHOP METHOD HOME TRAINING
By a Real Established Resident Trade School
With Classrooms, FM Studios, Shops and Laboratories

gives you the knowledge, skill, and experience that assure definite progress -- step-by-step for a brighter, more prosperous future. You Learn by Doing. Build a standard LONG DISTANCE SUPERHETERODYNE RECEIVER as shown above, an audio oscillator, a signal generator (low powered Radio transmitter) and many other units and experiment with equipment furnished you in your home. National Graduates everywhere have qualified, through spare time study for well-paying jobs, success and security in Radio. It is a field with a proved future. Find out what this industry offers National Trained Service Engineers, Operators and Technicians. Take the first step to greater success NOW by sending coupon below—TODAY!

FREE LESSON

NATIONAL SCHOOLS
LOS ANGELES 37, CALIFORNIA

MAIL COUPON

National Schools, Dept. 5-TC
4000 S. Figueroa Los Angeles 37, Calif.

Mail me sample lesson and book FREE. Paste on a postcard

NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY.....ZONE.....STATE.....
☐ Check here if Veteran of World War II

If Ruptured Try This Out

Modern Protection Provides Great Comfort and Holding Security
Without Torturous Truss Wearing

An "eye-opening" revelation in sensible and comfortable reducible rupture protection may be yours for the asking, without cost or obligation. Simply send name and address to William S. Rice, Inc., Dept. 1-B, Adams, N. Y., and full details of the new and different Rice Method will be sent you Free. Without hard flesh-gouging pads or tormenting pressure, here's a Support that has brought joy and comfort to thousands—by releasing them from Trusses with springs and straps that bind and cut. Designed to securely hold a rupture up and in where it belongs and yet give freedom of body and genuine comfort. For full information —write today!

BE A *Nurse*

MAKE $30-$40 A WEEK

You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. Thousands of graduates. 48th yr. One graduate has charge of 10-bed hospital. Another saved $400 while learning. Equipment included. Men, women 18 to 60. High School not required. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan. Write today.

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 424, 100 East Ohio Street, Chicago 11, Ill.
Please send free booklet and 16 sample lesson pages.
Name.....
City.....*State*.....*Age*.....

VETERANS! ••• HONORABLE
DISCHARGE RING Genuine STERLING SILVER Gold Finish

HERE'S A VALUE! Handsome, hefty Genuine Sterling Silver HONORABLE DISCHARGE RING, yellow gold finish, for only $1.98 plus tax. Beautiful Discharge Emblem on handsome scrolled mounting. A magnificent ring you'll wear for life.

SEND NO MONEY Mail your name, address, and ring size today. Your Genuine Sterling Gold Finish DISCHARGE RING will be sent to you AT ONCE. Pay your postman only $1.98 plus tax and postage. Wear the ring 10 days, if not delighted, return it and your money will be refunded at once. Yes, your satisfaction guaranteed! ORDER TODAY. Send strip of paper for size.
Charles Stewart, 616 Walnut St., Dept. L-205, Cincinnati 2, O.

What Every Mason Wants

We have Important Masonic books for Blue Lodge, Chapter, Commandery, Scottish Rite, and Shrine.
OUR RITUALS ARE USED THE WORLD OVER
Send for free catalog of books and rituals for Masons, Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, Knights of Columbus, etc.
EZRA A. COOK, Publisher, P. O. 796, GMY, Chicago 90, Ill.

ASTHMA Symptoms Relieved. Write today for free information and special money back offer.
W. K. STERLINE, 830 Ohio Ave., Sidney, Ohio

LAW STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 38 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for FREE BOOK.
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 76-T, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

GOOD MONEY
IN YOUR SPARE TIME.
Be our Dealer in your locality for STRONG UNION MADE WORK AND SPORT GARMENTS. No experience necessary. Easy work. Millions of workers buy work uniforms. We supply everything needed. Write immediately for FREE Outfit.
ROBT. STRONG GARMENT CO., 319-337 W. Van Buren St., Dept. K-S, Chicago, Ill.

RUPTURED?

Get Relief This Proven Way

Why try to worry along with trusses that gouge your flesh—press heavily on hips and spine—enlarge opening—fail to hold rupture? You need the Cluthe. No leg-straps or cutting belts. Automatic adjustable pad holds at real opening—follows every body movement with instant increased support in case of strain. Cannot slip whether at work or play. Light. Waterproof. Can be worn in bath. Send for amazing FREE book, "Advice To Ruptured," and details of liberal truthful 60-day trial offer. Also endorsements from grateful users in your neighborhood. Write:

Cluthe Sons, Dept. 33, Bloomfield, New Jersey

and Fat Stock Show at Fort Worth, Texas, this spring, will be $34,500 before any of the entrance fees are added. This gives us some idea of how the sport of the cowboy has progressed. At the same show in 1917, just thirty years ago the total prizes were $1,050.

A Unique Rodeo

One of the most unique rodeos was the second annual rodeo staged recently by Joe Davidson at Ozona, Texas. It was principally a calf roping show, what is usually called a jackpot roping in that there are no purses except those made up of the entrance fees paid in by contestants. There were 131 ropers, which made the purse about the biggest in the country for a two-day contest.

The purse in calf roping was $5,980 and the 131 ropers each roped on a program lasting a little less than three hours. Sonny Edwards and Dan Taylor tied for top honors the first day, each roping in 12.6 seconds. Troy Fort was third with a time of 13.3 seconds, and Tom Powers took fourth prize when he tied his calf in 13.5 seconds.

Toots Mansfield won first prize the second day when he wrapped his dogie up in 11.7 seconds, just seven-tenths slower than the world's record, but this did not win him the final prize as it went to Dan Taylor who had a total time of 26 seconds on two calves.

About two thousand spectators were present at the show each day. The unique features were that a big free barbecue was given each day, and the producer, Joe Davidson, fed all the cowboy contestants free of charge while they were there, furnished free feed for their horses, furnished bunkhouses or cabins free for their sleeping quarters, and gave the winner, in addition to his part of the cash prize, a fine two-year-old colt from his herd of fine quarter horses.

There is a certain rodeo held annually in Florida, and while it is not a long show it starts one year and finishes the next year! It is the rodeo at Lakeland, Florida, sponsored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce, and its last dates were December 30th, 1946, to January 4th, 1947!

Well, that is about all there is to dish up at the old Chuck Wagon this trip, so we'll be seeing you again next month, *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY

In Our Next Issue

AMIGOS, the day has come! All you readers who have been begging, month after month, for a longer Zorro story—here

it comes! In next month's WEST, the featured story is a full length novel of the old master of the sword and mask—A TASK FOR ZORRO, by Johnston McCulley.

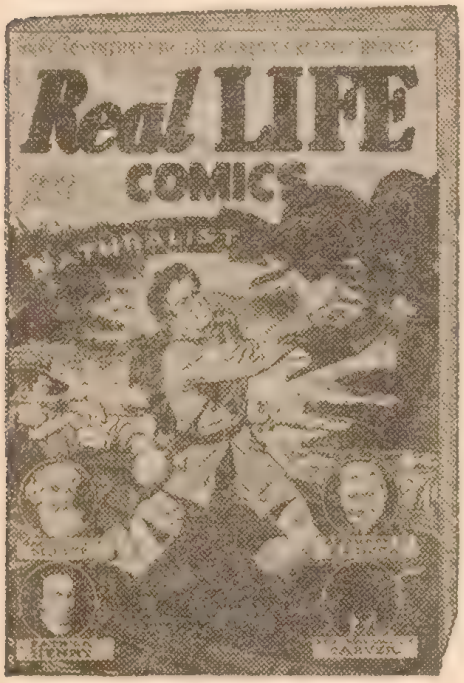
Thieves had been wantonly killing the cattle of San Gabriel Mission, stripping the hides from them and leaving the carcasses to the buzzards. Hundreds of cattle had been thus slaughtered in secret, their bloated bodies dotting the landscape. Appalled at the ruthless killing and the loss it meant to the mission, Fray Felipe called on the man only a few knew as Zorro, Don Diego Vega.

Don Diego, the languid son of the great Vega ranch, listened to the story, brushing at his lips with a lace handkerchief. No one who did not know would ever have guessed that this slender fop was the notorious Zorro whose sword and pistol were the terror of those who robbed and oppressed the weak.

"Something shall be done," Don Diego promised. "Is there anyone you suspect?"

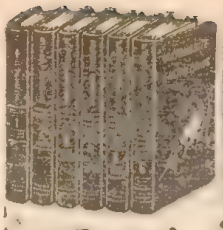
"There is a stranger in town, an Americano," Fray Felipe replied. "He arrived this morning. He appears to be a man of wild, adventurous spirit. This is the report I received about him. He may be blameless, but we are having him watched." [*Turn page*]

Inspiring True Picture-Stories of Adventure and Achievement!



Approved by Parents and Teachers!

Now On Sale 10c At All Stands



AUTO BOOKS ON APPROVAL

CAN YOU FIX IT?

These wonder books tell step by step HOW to make difficult repairs and adjustments, how to keep a car at maximum efficiency, including latest improvements in car design and operation. Engine troubles and how to correct them well covered.

6 BIG VOLUMES

2800 pages, 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc., including Diesel engines. Beautiful modernistic, washable cloth binding.

SEND NO MONEY. Just mail the coupon for a complete set of Six Big Auto Books, 20th Edition. Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, take immediate advantage of this FREE EXAMINATION OFFER.

MAKE GOOD MONEY NOW HOLD A PERMANENT JOB

America wants its automobiles kept in good repair. Men with "know how" are in demand, at big pay. These books will help you get and hold an important job, or give you a chance to go into business for yourself now or later. Any man who half tries to improve himself can learn auto servicing and repairing by this quick reference method. Use the JIFFY INDEX to find easily understood answer to any auto problem. These wonder books prepared by eleven of America's great automobile engineers. Many hundreds of valuable illustrations. Send the coupon TODAY.

[A year's consulting privileges with our engineers now given with these books without extra charge.]

Vocational Publishers Since 1898

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY, Dept. A549
Drexel Ave. at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.

I would like to examine your Six-Volume Set of Auto Books. I will pay the delivery charges only, but if I choose I may return them express collect. If after 10 days' use I prefer to keep them, I will send you $2 and pay the balance at the rate of only $3 a month until $24.80 has been paid. Please include consulting service as offered above.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Please attach letter stating age, occupation, employer's name and address, and name and address of at least one business man as reference. Men in service, also please give home address.

ACCOUNTANT

BECOME AN EXPERT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $2,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A.'s. Placement counsel and help. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays." G. I. APPROVED.

LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 5329-H, Chicago 5, Ill.

OLD LEG TROUBLE

Easy to use Viscose Home Method. Heals many old leg sores caused by leg congestion, varicose veins, swollen legs and injuries or no cost for trial if it fails to show results in 10 days. Describe your trouble and get a FREE BOOK.

T. G. VISCOSE COMPANY
140 N. Dearborn Street, Chicago 2, Illinois

EYE-GLASSES

LATEST STYLES

TRY by MAIL NOW

SEND NO MONEY

TEST YOUR OWN SIGHT at Home with our New Patented Sight Testers.

16 DAYS' TRIAL OFFER

GLASSES As Low As

MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE!

NEW LOW PRICES

FREE If you're not 100% satisfied with glasses we make we will refund every cent you pay us. Repairs! 48 CATALOG and scientific test chart. Hr. Service!

U. S. EYE-GLASSES CO. 1557 MILWAUKEE AVE., DEPT. 5-82, CHICAGO, ILL.

AUTHENTIC WESTERN
SADDLE RING
FOR MEN! & WOMEN!
PURE STERLING SILVER
Only $4.95
Postpaid We Pay Tax
CUT OUT THIS BAND TO FIND RING SIZE
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14
First time at anywhere near this low price! Authentic replica of romantic western saddle. Handsomely formed from solid Sterling Silver by Navajo Indian craftsmen. Massive style for men, dainty style for women. A gift of distinction. A pleasure to wear. Sent on approval.
SEND NO MONEY! Just clip this ad and mail with your name and address. Pay postman only $4.95 plus few cents postage on arrival; or send cash and we pay postage. Wear this sensational ring for 10 days. If not delighted, return for full refund. ORDER NOW! USE COUPON BELOW!
10 DAY TRIAL ORDER COUPON
ARIZONA CRAFTSMEN ROOM 606B
1904 FARNAM ST. OMAHA 2, NEBRASKA
SEND Sterling Saddle Ring as I have indicated below.
☐ C.O.D. ☐ Cash Enclosed, Send Postpaid
NAME
ADDRESS
CITY STATE
☐ Men's ☐ Women's Ring Size

USED Correspondence Courses
Complete HOME-STUDY COURSES and self-instruction textbooks, slightly used, rented, sold, exchanged. All subjects, levels, satisfaction. Cash paid for used courses. Full details & 100-page illustrated bargain catalog Free.
Write Nelson Co., 1139 S. Wabash Av., Dept. 06, Chicago 5, Ill.

FREE ENLARGEMENT of your Favorite Photo
FROM FAMOUS HOLLYWOOD FILM STUDIOS
Just to get acquainted we will make a beautiful 5 x 7 enlargement of any picture or negative. Be sure to include color of hair, eyes and clothing and get our bargain offer for having your enlargement beautifully hand colored in oil and mounted in your choice of handsome frames. Limit 2 to a customer. Please enclose 10c to cover cost of handling and mailing each enlargement. Your original picture or negative will be returned with the FREE 5 x 7 enlargement postpaid. Act now! Offer limited to U. S. A.
HOLLYWOOD FILM STUDIOS
7021 Santa Monica Blvd., Dept. 270, Hollywood, Calif.

FOR ITCHING, BURNING, IRRITATION OF
ECZEMA PSORIASIS Athlete's Foot
Amazing Wonder Cream—14 DAYS FREE TRIAL
Do tiny water blisters form? Do dry scaly patches form? Does skin crack, thicken, peel, or swell? Does itching, burning, redness become intense?
SEND NO MONEY—UNLESS 100% SATISFIED
MAIL COUPON TODAY
WILEY PRODUCTS—Dept. TG-5
4300 Drexel Blvd., Chicago 15, Ill.
Send postpaid full size jar Wiley's Wonderful Skin Cream for 14 days Free Trial. Will use it faithfully. If not satisfied will notify you within 20 days after receiving jar; otherwise will keep jar and pay for it.
NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY STATE

The strange Americano's name was Barney Burke, a sandy-haired six-footer, slender except for his powerful and broad shoulders. It was not long before Burke and Don Diego met. Burke had accepted a challenge to a horse race, which he would have won, had not the Mexican rider fouled him by slashing at Burke and his pony with his quirt.

The hot-tempered American was not one to take this calmly—in the fight that followed, he knocked the Mexican rider unconscious and would have been mobbed had not Don Diego interfered. Stepping in front of the advancing mob, still languidly, he held up his hand.

'Stand back, vaqueros!" he said. "This Americano has done nothing wrong. He was treated dishonestly and resented that treatment as any proper man would. Think how you would feel in his place. Do not put your hands on him! I place him under my protection!"

The name of Vega carried the day as always. It was the Vega rancho most of the vaquero's were going to work for in the great cattle slaughter which was scheduled, and they had no desire to bite the hand that fed them. So presently Burke and Don Diego found themselves, unmolested, facing each other over goblets of wine in the tavern.

Don Diego invited Burke to be his guest at the Vega ranch during the festivities. Part of it was friendly hospitality, the rest shrewdness. He thought that if Burke were mixed up in any way with the killing of the Mission cattle, it would be well to have the Americano where he could watch him and follow him as Zorro, should the need arise.

Burke accepted with enthusiasm. And then he had a shock for his host.

"I believe you're my kind of man, a square man as we say, meaning you're honest and fair in your dealings. So I want to be honest with you, too, and not accept your hospitality until I tell you a certain thing."

"If you insist, Senor Burke."

"It's true I want to study your methods of stock raising. But I'm here on another mission, too. It'll probably meet with your approval, but I want to be sure. I have heard of this mysterious Senor Zorro, the masked man who rides the hills and highways."

"Ah, yes! I understand he is rather a turbulent fellow," Diego replied, hiding his swift smile by brushing his handkerchief across his face quickly.

"I've learned that your Governor has proclaimed him to be a highwayman and outlaw and has offered a large reward for his capture. I could use that money to start a little ranch of my own."

"And do you really think you could catch

this mysterious Senor Zorro when the soldiers have failed to do it?"

"I've dealt with Indian cattle thieves and white renegade rustlers, Don Diego. I know a lot of tricks in man-tracking that your cavalry may not know!"

Don Diego could not laugh until he had left the tavern and Burke. The irony of it! He, Zorro was going to watch Burke like a hawk, and Burke was going to do his best to run down Zorro!

But Zorro was not making the mistake of underestimating the American. Burke, he knew, would be a formidable foe. And the duel which lay ahead might prove to be a wild and dangerous one if Burke ever caught a hint of the truth.

And so began the strangest adventure of them all. Ride up and drop your reins, you Zorro fans, there are good times ahead. A TASK FOR ZORRO means a job of solid entertainment for you.

It's a grand, swashbuckling yarn, everybody—and you'll enjoy every bit of it! Remember—a full-length Zorro novel next month!

In the same issue is another story in the popular Rawhide series—TROUBLE BADGE, by Tom Parsons. It is the story of Breck Long, a lawman who liked Rawhide and his

[*Turn page*]

Plenty to SEE from Cover to Cover!

ENTERTAINING, UP-TO-THE-MINUTE PHOTO FEATURES ON EVERY PAGE!

•

NOW ON SALE—10c AT ALL STANDS

DRAW for MONEY!

Be An ARTIST!

PREPARE TODAY FOR THE FUTURE THAT LIES AHEAD

Trained Artists Are Capable of Earning $50, $60, $75 A WEEK

Use your spare time to prepare for a profitable Art Career! Start training at home, now!

It's pleasant and interesting to study Art the W. S. A. way. COMMERCIAL ART, DESIGNING, CARTOONING—all in one complete course. No previous Art experience necessary—we teach you step-by-step by our practical home study method well-known since 1914. Write today for information in FREE BOOK, "ART FOR PLEASURE AND PROFIT"—tells all about our course, material furnished, instruction service and commercial opportunities for you in art. STATE AGE.

Course Approved Under G.I. Bill

WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART
Studio 665H, 1115-15th St., N.W., Wash. 5, D.C.

High School Course at Home

Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-558, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

LAW . . .

STUDY AT HOME Legally trained men win higher positions and bigger success in business and public life. Greater opportunities now than ever before.

More Ability: More Prestige: More Money We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. We furnish all text material, including 14-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 48-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send NOW. G. I. APPROVED.

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY, 417 South Dearborn Street
A Correspondence Institution Dept. 5329-L, Chicago 5, Ill.

INVENTORS

Detailed information on how to secure patent protection for your invention will be mailed promptly upon request.

Victor J. Evans & Co., Merlin M. Evans, Registered Patent Attorney, 207-E Merlin Bldg., Washington 6, D. C.

STAMMER?

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering — successful for 46 years. *Free — no obligation.*

GET THIS FREE BOOK!

Benjamin N. Bogue, Dept. 4278, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

CONFIDENTIAL LOAN SERVICE

Borrow $50 to $300.00

Need money? No matter where you live you can borrow BY MAIL $50.00 to $300.00 this easy quick *confidential* way.

BY MAIL

IT IS EASY TO BORROW BY MAIL! Completely confidential and private. CONVENIENT MONTHLY PAYMENTS

NO ENDORSERS NEEDED. EMPLOYED MEN and women of good character can solve their money problems quickly and in privacy with loans MADE BY MAIL. No endorsers or co-signers. We do not contact employers, friends or relatives. Convenient monthly payments. Send us your name and address and we will mail application blank and complete details FREE in plain envelope. There is no obligation.

STATE FINANCE CO.
303 Marine Bldg. • Dept. J-82 • New Orleans 12, La.

GENUINE MILITARY
WRIST WATCH
Complete with New Style
EXPANSION BAND

Sensational value! Genuine Military wrist watch, precision built, split-second timekeeper, for ONLY $13.95 plus tax! Water-protected, shock absorber. Radium dial and hands, easily read in the dark, unbreakable crystal, **red sweep second hand.** Handsome, non-corrosive stainless steel case. Genuine non-corrosive stainless steel expansion bracelet fits all wrists. Order yours today!

ONLY $13.95 PLUS TAX

SEND NO MONEY! Rush order now. Pay postman only $13.95 plus postage and 10% Fed. tax. If not delighted, return within 10 days for refund.

CORONA WATCH SALES COMPANY
809 W. Madison St., Dept. C-14, Chicago 7, Ill.

DETECTIVES
TRAINING—SECRET INVESTIGATIONS—FINGER PRINTS
Easy Method—Short Time. Home—Travel—Secret Code-Booklet FREE—WRITE. INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM, 1701-T Monroe St., N. E., Washington, D. C. 18.

A LAUGH ON EVERY PAGE OF
CARTOON
HUMOR
FEATURING AMERICA'S MOST
POPULAR CARTOONISTS
Now on Sale — 25c at All Stands!

job in Rawhide and hoped that Rawhide liked him. Once Breck Long had been a shooting lawdog, quick of temper and quick on the trigger. Sickened of killing, Breck Long threw up his job in a northern town and drifted south to Rawhide. In this friendly community, he hoped to keep law and order with the help of lawful neighbors, and not have to kill and kill again.

But the little things, the tiny things that upset man's life and plans, upset Breck Long's hopes. There was an outlaw he had killed, years back. Dead, the man could do Breck Long no harm, or so thought Breck Long. He was wrong. The dead outlaw had a brother who cherished a burning hatred for the lawdog who had sent lead crashing into an outlaw heart.

So Breck Long had to take up his trade again—the trade of the killer. And in doing so he had to risk all the things that had made life good, had brought him peace and the dream of contentment and love.

By such risks do men live. And reading Breck Long's story you will see how men face that appalling moment in their lives when they gamble everything to win—or lose.

Those are our featured stories for next month's big issue. In addition you'll have fast action short stories, features of the West, The Chuck Wagon by Foghorn Clancy and this chat with the editor to round out the bill. Happy reading!

LETTER BOX

NEXT month's feature novel is the best kind of evidence our correspondents might ask as to the value of writing letters. Enough readers asked for a long Zorro story long enough and finally we talked Mr. McCulley into writing one. Now if there's something some of you other folks want, why keep writing and asking and you're plumb liable to get it.

I am a steady reader of WEST and like it more than I can say. I also read RIO KID WESTERN and TEXAS RANGERS, your other magazines. I like old Doc Swap and I think people who don't like Zorro don't like much of anything.
—Archie Van Johnston, Columbia Falls, Mont.

Archie, you're a man after our own heart. You'll sure like the June issue, if you like Zorro, so better tie a latigo around your finger and remember to get your copy.

RIDERS OF CARNE COVE was a peach of a story. It had the feel and smell of the West in it. Let's have more of this kind and less of Zorro. I don't care for him.
—Donald Bronson, Davenport, Iowa.

Shucks, is that a sour note in the chorus?

Something tells me, Don, you're going to change your mind about Zorro when you read next month's novel.

Has anybody told you what a good idea the Rawhide series is? To take a whole town like that, and give a story to each person in it—the storekeeper, the freighter, the barber, the doctor, the minister—it's a cross-section of the West and shows just how life went on there. A wonderful idea. I only wish the author tried to come a little closer to life instead of using outlaws all the time.
—*Shirley Hoffman, Lubbock, Texas.*

That Shirley packs a posy in one hand and a brick in the other, doesn't she? But that's the kind of straight from the shoulder talk we like to get. If enough of you write in we'll get a pretty good idea of what you like and don't like in a magazine. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, WEST, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16. N.Y. Thanks, everybody. So long until next month.
—THE EDITOR

COMING NEXT MONTH

•

A TASK FOR ZORRO

A Complete Book-Length Don Diego Vega Novel

By

JOHNSTON McCULLEY

•

TROUBLE BADGE

A Rawhide Story

By TOM PARSONS

AND MANY OTHER EXCITING YARNS!

HOME-STUDY BRINGS BIGGER PAY

Don't be caught napping when Opportunity knocks. Prepare for advancement and more money by training *now* for the job ahead. *Free 48-Page Books Tell How.* Write for the book on the business field you like—or mail us this ad with your name and address in the margin. *Now,* please.

☐Higher Accountancy ☐Business Management
☐Traffic Management ☐Salesmanship
☐Law—Degree of LL.B. ☐Expert Bookkeeping
☐Commercial Law ☐C. P. A. Coaching
☐Stenotypy (Machine Shorthand)

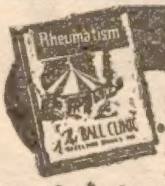
G. I. APPROVED

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution
Dept. 5329-R 417 So. Dearborn St. Chicago 5

TOOTHACHE? DUE TO CAVITY

GET QUICK AMAZING RELIEF by placing Dent's Tooth Gum—or Drops—in cavity of aching tooth. Cavity toothache frequently strikes when you can't see dentist. Be prepared! Ask your druggist for either complete aid package. Follow directions. 25¢

DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS



RHEUMATISM

ARTHRITIS-NEURITIS-SCIATICA

If you suffer the agonizing pains of these diseases when the usual remedies have failed, learn about a new trustworthy, modern, non-surgical treatment method. This marvelous treatment is completely explained in the Ball Clinic's FREE Book. Write today. No obligation.

BALL CLINIC Dept. 504 Excelsior Springs, Mo.

HORSE MASTERY!

A FINE HOBBY — A GREAT VOCATION!

"The EXPERT HORSEMAN"

SUBSCRIBE TODAY 50¢ One Year

FREE BOOK — Tells how You can learn to: BREAK COLTS, GAIT SHOW HORSES, TRAIN RODEO, STOCK and RACE HORSES, BREAK BAD HABITS, HANDLE ANY HORSE. TRAIN CIRCUS TRICK HORSES. WRITE TODAY!

ANIMAL LOVERS ASSOCIATION
BOX TH-157 TARZANA, CALIFORNIA

This Easy Way
TEACHES GUITAR
to Your Satisfaction in 30 Days Or Money Back

Astounding new Jim Major Home Method teaches you to play guitar easily, quickly, without long hours practicing scales or exercises. *No musical knowledge necessary.* Play many popular songs, hymns in very short time. 30 lessons, complete course for only $1.69. EXTRA—BIG 53 SONG BOOK included without additional cost. Send no money . . . pay postman $1.69 plus postage. (Cash with order we pay postage.) Money back guarantee. Send today to Jim Major, Room 15-E, 230 East Ohio, Chicago 11, Ill.

Thunder rides the skies

When hot-headed, handsome Lewt McCanles gallops recklessly along a trail that can lead only to flaming gunplay, a million-acre cattle empire trembles in the balance. Brother wars on brother in an action-packed, swift-shooting story of the great American Southwest in its sprawling, brawling infancy.

POPULAR LIBRARY
A LUSTY NOVEL OF THE SOUTHWEST
DUEL in the SUN
Niven Busch
THE DRAMATIC NOVEL FROM WHICH THE SELZNICK TECHNICOLOR FILM EPIC WAS MADE STARRING JENNIFER JONES · JOSEPH COTTEN · GREGORY PECK

Don't miss

DUEL IN THE SUN

smash success of current western novels, complete and *unabridged* (originally a $2.50 best seller), now available in a glossy POPULAR LIBRARY edition for 25c. Get DUEL IN THE SUN today.

A Best Seller at $2.50

now, Popular Library Edition

only 25¢

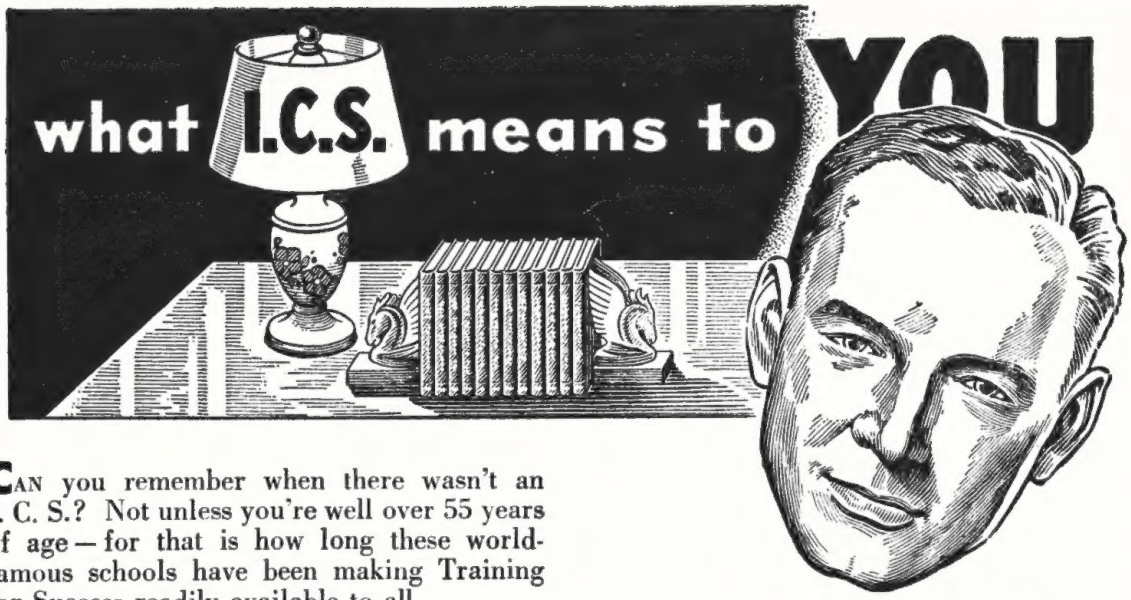
AT ALL NEWSSTANDS NOW!

POPULAR LIBRARY

Books of Proven Merit

Starred in $6,000,000 Technicolor Production

JENNIFER JONES
GREGORY PECK
JOSEPH COTTEN



CAN you remember when there wasn't an I. C. S.? Not unless you're well over 55 years of age—for that is how long these world-famous schools have been making Training for Success readily available to all.

Before I. C. S., multitudes of potentially able men and women had no place to turn for the knowledge they needed in mastering rewarding careers. Today there's no excuse for any one anywhere to struggle under the handicap imposed by lack of training.

If you are one of the many without time or opportunity to attend traditional schools . . . if it's necessary for you to do your *learning* while you're *earning* . . . I. C. S. is especially designed for you. Whatever your interest, you'll find it covered by one of the 400 I. C. S. Courses in technical and business subjects. However you're situated, this training can be yours.

The records of thousands of successful students demonstrate that today's I. C. S. student is tomorrow's leader. The same Opportunity they seized is at your door right now. That's what I. C. S. means to you . . . if you are alert, forward-looking, determined to get ahead. You can prove your alertness by mailing the coupon *right now.*

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3970-H, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

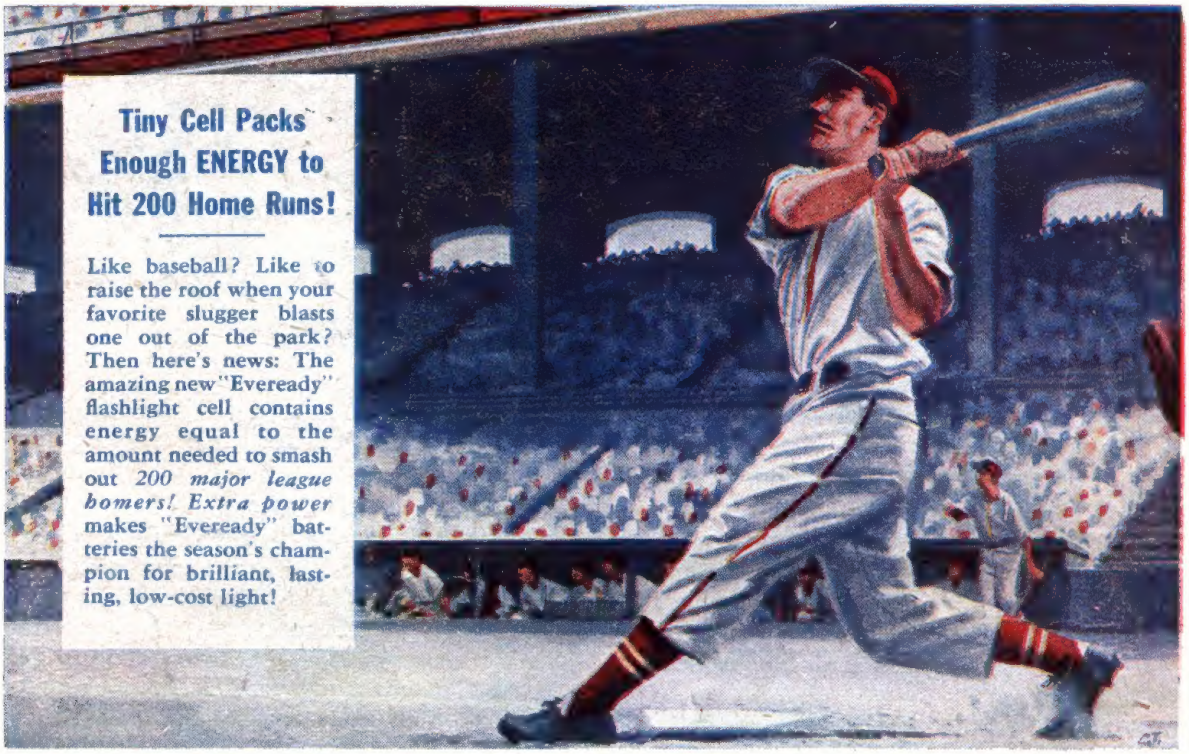
*Name*_____ *Age*_____ *Home Address*_____

*City*_____ *State*_____ *Present Position*_____

*Working Hours*_____ *A.M. to*_____ *P.M.* **Length of Service in World War II**_____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Enrollment under the G.I. Bill of Rights approved for War II Veterans.
Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

NEW "EVEREADY" FLASHLIGHT BATTERY LASTS 93% LONGER!



Tiny Cell Packs Enough ENERGY to Hit 200 Home Runs!

Like baseball? Like to raise the roof when your favorite slugger blasts one out of the park? Then here's news: The amazing new "Eveready" flashlight cell contains energy equal to the amount needed to smash out *200 major league homers! Extra power* makes "Eveready" batteries the season's champion for brilliant, lasting, low-cost light!

WHAT a supercharger is to a racing car—the new "Eveready" battery is to your flashlight. It "packs in the energy"—93% more of it than even the great pre-war "Eveready" cells gave you! You get nearly *double* the life . . . maximum light for nearly *twice* as long. For good service...better light...best quality... get these new "Eveready" brand flashlight batteries!

The registered trade-mark "Eveready" distinguishes products of

NATIONAL CARBON COMPANY, INC.

30 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Unit of Union Carbide UCC *and Carbon Corporation*

Nearly *twice* the electric energy . . . almost *two times longer life* of brilliant white light than even famous pre-war "Eveready" flashlight batteries. *That's* today's *high-energy* "Eveready" battery, as proved by the "Light Industrial Flashlight" test devised by the American Standards Association.

93% MORE ENERGY NOW

1941

High Energy **MEANS**

BRIGHTER LIGHT, LONGER LIFE

EVEREADY

TRADE-MARK

FLASHLIGHT BATTERIES